

# THE Christian CENTURY

*Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.*

WHY WE CAN HOPE  
**EVERYONE  
WILL BE  
SAVED**

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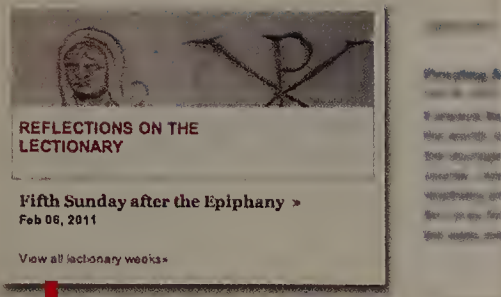
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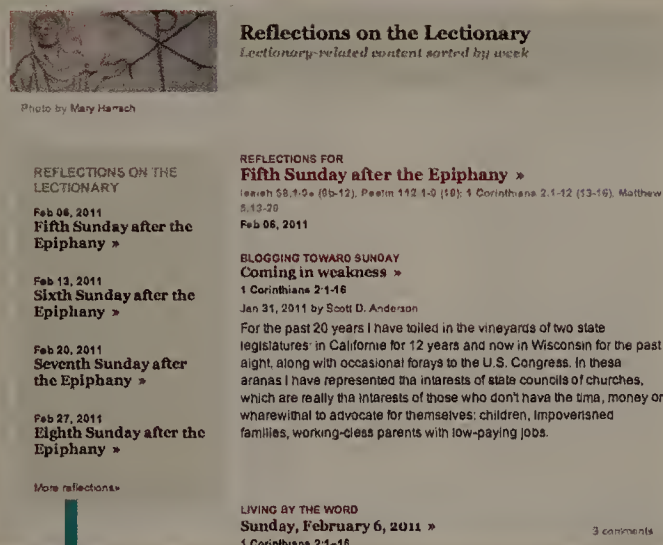


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**Christian**  
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## Grace before anything

LEWIS SMEDES, who taught theology at Fuller Seminary, studied with Karl Barth and once asked the great theologian if he was a universalist. Barth put his face close to Smedes, poked a finger in his chest and said, "Ich bin kein universalist [I am not a universalist]." Barth then asked Smedes, "You believe the Bible? Fine, then believe this too," and Barth quoted Paul's words, "Christ died not for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world," and added, "If you are worried about universalism, you had better begin worrying about the Bible." Smedes realized that he needed to quit worrying about whether he was acceptable to God, "to quit stewing about it and just rest in the fact that I was loved and accepted by God, no strings attached."

In this issue Paul Dafydd Jones critiques three books on the eternal destiny of humans. The topic can bring out the worst in people, but Jones treats the various perspectives with respect. In presenting his own stance of "hopeful universalism," he suggests that a profitable discussion needs "a belief in the open-ended task of exegesis, a light theological touch, a dose of good humor and a clear sense of the impossibility of closure."

One of my encounters with the controversy over this issue came while serving a church located a few blocks from the Moody Bible Institute. Founder Dwight L. Moody and one of my early predecessors had been great friends, and the two institutions once saw themselves as partners in ministry in Chicago. Moody students worked for our church, taught Sunday school and sang in the choir. But after the modernist-fundamentalist controversy, Moody and the Presbyterian church pulled apart and identified with different theological strains.

By the time I arrived, Moody students were only occasional visitors in our worship services. I always suspected that they

were there on assignment. When I would suggest in a sermon that God's love for us is unconditional and can overcome anything in us, and that grace abounds, they'd approach me after the benediction, Bibles in hand. "Do you really mean what you said, that God will save us even if we haven't done a thing? Even if we don't know what we believe?"

These were never satisfying conversations, and I'm sure the students were convinced that I and my ilk were hopelessly lost. Some even went for the jugular and informed me that because of my message I was responsible for the eternal damnation of some of those to whom I preached.

As soon as I was old enough to think about it, I was uncomfortable with the idea that accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is an automatic ticket to heaven, and with the reverse idea—that failing to confess belief in Christ results in an eternity in hell, even in the case of unbaptized infants and all the people who have never heard about Jesus. What about those who heard but were unpersuaded? What about my Uncle Harry? God consigning all those people to hell never squared in my mind with God loving us as a parent loves a child. I wondered how a parent could condemn a child to punishment forever.

The issue remained beneath the surface of my thinking until I bumped into the notion of prevenient grace, grace that comes before anything else, in spite of anything we have done or not done. I understood then that whatever relationship existed with God had a lot more to do with God than with me. My whole idea of Christianity turned from a method of guaranteeing salvation to the acknowledgment and proclamation of astonishingly good news. My response is gratitude.

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# IN THIS Issue

6

## Letters

Listening to Palestinians

7

## Liberty imperiled?

The Editors: The Catholic bishops' argument is weak

8

## CenturyMarks

Eyes open in prayer, etc.

10

## The end of impunity?

John Kiess: The International Criminal Court issues a verdict

12

## Hard choices in Egypt

Jayson Casper: Will Christians vote for the old regime?

22

## A hopeful universalism

Paul Dafydd Jones: Why we can hope everyone will be saved

28

## Lending with grace

Jesse James DeConto: Breaking the cycle of payday loans

32



## Ministry in the 21st century

An interview with Joyce Shin



## NEWS

- 14** Churches more wary of partisan politics;  
Atheists, believers do good for different reasons;  
Nuns rap Vatican for 'unsubstantiated' charges;  
Vatican censures nun's book on sexual ethics

## IN REVIEW

- 36 Books**  
**J. Nelson Kraybill:** *Revelations*, by Elaine Pagels  
**William R. Burrows:** *The World's Christians*,  
by Douglas Jacobsen  
**Amy Frykholm:** *The Better Angels of Our Nature*,  
by Steven Pinker  
**Miho Nonaka:** *Saint Sinatra and Other Poems*,  
by Angela Alaimo O'Donnell
- 44 Film**  
**Steve Vineberg:** *Marvel's The Avengers* and *Dark Shadows*
- 47 Art**  
**Lois Huey-Heck:** *Ruach*, by Julie Elliot

## COLUMNS

- 3 Editor's Desk**  
**John M. Buchanan:** Grace before anything
- 20, 21 Living by the Word**  
**Douglass Key**
- 35 Faith Matters**  
**Thomas G. Long:** Future fatigue
- 45 American Soundings**  
**Rodney Clapp:** Animals in the kingdom

## POETRY

- 11 Carol Gilbertson:** Atitlán
- 24 Anya Silver:** On our anniversary

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## Listening to Palestinians

In an otherwise helpful article on Israel, the Palestinians and divestment (“Investment, not divestment,” May 16), Thomas Prinz and Karl-John Stone argue that investment in Israel, not punitive economic measures, will provide a constructive atmosphere for peacemaking. But they miss two important realities. First, this strategy has been in place for years—and to no avail. The U.S. has even offered economic incentives (free military hardware, loan guarantees, money, etc.), and Israeli intransigence has prevailed. Requests to stop illegal settlements have been met with a simple no.

Second, Prinz and Stone fail to mention that in this case the churches of Palestine have asked us to stand with them and up the ante with economic measures. The Palestine Kairos document of 2009 says this explicitly and was signed by the very representatives of these authors’ church as well as more than 2,700 Palestinian Christians. This is a direct echo of what the South African churches asked in their Kairos document in 1985. We listened to the Africans and respected their discernment. And good things resulted. Perhaps it is time we listened to the church in this region that lives with the realities of occupation.

*Gary M. Burge*  
Wheaton, Ill.

Prinz and Stone’s article is dishonest and disingenuous. It is a slap in the face of the Palestinian Christians who, in their Kairos document, plead for help, especially from Christians in the West, to support their resistance to the brutal Israeli occupation through nonviolent means. The article talks about Israeli suffering without mentioning that it is largely caused by the Israeli government’s policy of occupation and the coerced submission of the Palestinians.

The article spells out support for the 1 percent expected to gain from the “capital market.” Not a word about the 99 percent, which includes fishermen whose livelihood depends on fishing in the high seas and who are forbidden by the occupying power

to do so; tens of thousands of Bedouins who are no longer allowed to graze their flocks on land to which they had user rights for thousands of years; farmers on some of the best agricultural land on the Gaza strip who are being killed on an almost weekly basis for planting and harvesting their crops; farmers who are deprived of growing vegetables in the Gaza area because the occupying power prohibits exporting to foreign markets; farmers living in the Jordan valley and others living near the settlements who are driven off their land; hundreds of farmers in the occupied West Bank whose wells have been destroyed or closed by the Israeli occupiers and by Jewish settlers; thousands of farmers who have no free access to their land—cut off by the separation wall or by the new highway system—and who have to wait hours (sometimes days) before being allowed to work their farms; hundreds of farmers whose age-old olive trees were destroyed with impunity by the Israeli occupiers and Jewish settlers.

*Peter van der Veen*  
Bellingham, Wash.

Prinz and Stone’s proposal is reminiscent of the attempt of the South African government to encourage development of the ethnically homogeneous homelands or bantustans. Investment, both foreign and domestic, was encouraged, ostensibly to increase the quality of life of black Africans and to give them a measure of autonomy. For the millions who had been forcibly resettled to these “homelands,” this development, beginning with the Transkei in the mid-1970s and proceeding to Bophuthatswana, KwaZulu, Ciskei, Venda and elsewhere, had an initial allure.

The goal of the plan, however, was clear: to strengthen the system of “separate development” (apartheid) and limit the risk of uncontrolled resistance to it—by creating conditions that would encourage accommodation. All investment was controlled by the South African government and served to reinforce the apartheid status quo.

When leaders of the antiapartheid movement opposed this type of economic development, some people were astonished. Like the authors of this article, they asked, “How can you oppose something that will improve the quality of life of the people?” Others understood clearly that the goal of the South African government was simply to shape development under conditions of the apartheid system.

Rather than disparaging “the narrative of our suffering Palestinian brothers and sisters,” we might do well to listen closely to what they are saying. The authors may be well intended. But in our view only systemic change—preceded by an end to the 45-year military occupation of the Palestinian territories—will be able to fulfill the goal we clearly share with the authors, namely to “help Palestinians and Israelis move toward the day when they live at peace as neighbors.”

*Philip Anderson*  
*Paul Wee*  
Washington, D.C.

### Church as community . . .

Nicholas M. Healy’s essay (“In and of the world,” May 16) places great faith in sociology. This too will pass. Theologians will learn to benefit from sociology’s insights as they have with other language games—philosophy, science, history, psychology—without bowing to its decrees.

Healy also expresses remarkable faith that, whatever it is, the church today is what it is meant to be. So if sociologists determine that the church is not (or the vast majority of churches are not) community, then theology must accommodate itself to that reality.

But what if this faith is misplaced? What if the vast majority of churches today are not what God intends for them to be? Perhaps (as was often the case with ancient Israel, according to the prophets) the church today stands under judgment.

*David Paul Henry*  
Lamoine, Me.



June 27, 2012

## Liberty imperiled?

**T**he U.S. Catholic bishops have designated the two weeks leading up to July 4 as a “fortnight of freedom” and urged Catholics to rally for religious liberty—a liberty that is, they say, now “under attack,” especially from the Obama administration.

In their statement “Our First, Most Cherished Liberty,” the bishops offer seven “concrete examples” of religious liberty being undermined. Some of the examples are dubious, however, and touch on cases of varied seriousness and relevance. For example, the bishops cite a 2009 proposal in the Connecticut legislature that sought, in the wake of a case of fraud at a Catholic parish, to provide government oversight of parish finances. The bishops fail to mention that this proposal went nowhere in the legislature and was denounced on all sides as a clear violation of the First Amendment. The actual threat posed to religious liberty was minimal.

The galvanizing issue for the bishops, of course, is the Obama administration’s requirement under the Affordable Care Act that coverage for contraceptives be included in all health insurance plans. For months now, the bishops have been asking that exemptions to that rule be given not only to churches but to religious schools, hospitals and social service agencies. Otherwise, they argue, Catholic institutions will be forced to pay, through insurance premiums, for a medical service condemned by Catholic teaching.

We earlier supported the bishops’ call for an expanded exemption (“Reasonable exception,” February 22). The administration responded to the bishops by declaring that the Catholic agencies in question would not have to pay for contraceptive coverage; that cost would be absorbed by insurance companies. This position both promoted the goal of full access to contraception and honored the bishops’ conviction that Catholic agencies should not have to pay for it.

The bishops rejected this approach, however, and never bothered to make a proposal of their own. This stance suggests that their concern all along was more about limiting access to contraception than about who foots the bill. That suspicion was confirmed when the bishops turned from arguing for an exemption from the contraception mandate to arguing for the repeal of the mandate itself, claiming that it’s a violation of religious liberty.

It isn’t. Under the First Amendment, religious believers have often been granted exemptions from general laws, such as laws requiring service in the military, or school attendance, or children’s vaccinations. But the logic of accommodation on religious grounds has never meant that the law in question—requiring military service, say, or vaccinations—is itself a violation of religious liberty and must be repealed. That is the argument that the bishops are trying to make, but it is muddled and unconvincing. As we wrote several months ago: the claims of religious consciences must be respected, but they are not a trump card that wins every argument in public policy.

**The Catholic bishops’ appeal to religious liberty is unconvincing.**

# CENTURY marks

**WATCH AND PRAY:** Prayer is the ground of Christian faith and a test of theology, says Jürgen Moltmann. We can't say things to others about God that we haven't already said to God in prayer. In prayer, Moltmann says, we see the world with the eyes of God. But the biblical command is not to pray but to watch: "To pray means to open one's eyes and watch what is happening, what is coming, the dangers and the opportunities." Images in the catacombs show that the early Christians prayed with open hands and open eyes (interview in *Third Way*, June).

**DIVINE SPARK:** The word *asylum* means shelter or protection from danger. One of the first asylums was called the Retreat, and it was established by Quakers in 1796 in York, England. The Quakers, seeing a divine spark in every-

one, tried to remove the stigma then attached to the mentally ill. The Retreat emphasized friendship with the insane and incorporated exercise therapy, pet therapy and occupational therapy. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Quakers opened a similar facility in 1817, inspiring similar ventures in the next few years in Boston, New York, Hartford and Charleston (*American Scholar*, Spring).

**PEACE TRAIN:** Korean churches are developing plans for a "peace train" that would travel from Berlin through Moscow and Beijing and on to Busan, South Korea, in time for the World Council of Churches global assembly in October 2013. The plan is to draw attention to the need for peace and reunification in the Korean peninsula. The train, which would carry representatives of churches and of civil society, would pass through

North Korea. The National Council of Churches of Korea is also meeting with the governments of North and South Korea in hopes that a peace treaty can be signed in 2013 that marks the 60th anniversary of the cease-fire that ended the Korean War (ENI).

**STATE OF PREACHING:** In *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, Ross Douthat laments the poor state of preaching, complaining about preachers who dispense a gospel of narcissism or who promise people material prosperity. But complaints about preaching are hardly new, says John Wilson in the *Wall Street Journal* (May 31). "Preaching—and worship—is in need of renewal because it is always in need of renewal. No pastor, congregation or denomination will ever get it right once and for all." Wilson doubts there is any new method that can guarantee successful preaching.

**SNAKE HANDLER:** Mark Randall Wolford, a snake-handling preacher from West Virginia, died last month from a rattlesnake bite during a religious meeting. As a boy Wolford had watched his own father, also a snake-handling preacher, die an agonizing death from a snakebite. Snake handling by Pentecostal preachers began in an east Tennessee church in 1909. The practice is based on Mark 16, which promises that followers of Jesus will be able to handle snakes and drink "any deadly thing" without being harmed (MSNBC News, May 30).

**COVERING RELIGION:** Jon Stewart, host of the humorous *Daily Show*, appears to be a nonpracticing Jew, but his show covers religion better than any other TV program except for

CASTAWAY ISLAND





*Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, claims Mark Oppenheimer. Writers for the *Daily Show* find humor in the finer points of religion rather than in caricatures of it. Sometimes the beliefs or practices of religion are shown as bizarre, but often it's the antagonists of religion who are made to look silly. In one sketch, a Muslim woman's application to become a foster mother is rejected because she won't allow pork products in her house. The episode helped to explain Muslim dietary practices while making the foster agency's objections look ignorant and bigoted (Religion & Politics, May 1).

**MOSQUE ON HOLD:** A judge in Tennessee issued a ruling that halted the construction of a nearly completed mosque about 34 miles south of Nashville. He claimed that the planning commission had not given enough public notice prior to a 2010 meeting when the mosque plans were approved. An antimosque group has been battling the mosque construction for the last two years, arguing that Islam is not a real religion and is not protected by the U.S. Constitution. "If you read the judge's ruling, it is clear he sought a heightened standard of public notice for an issue that involves Muslims," said Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. A civil rights group has asked the U.S. Justice Department to intervene if the planning commission doesn't immediately reissue building permits for the 52,000-square-foot mosque (Orlando Sentinel, May 29).

**HAPPY READERS:** There's an adage in journalism that for every angry letter received there are ten happy readers who don't bother to express their satisfaction. That formula was turned on its head when Susan Reimer wrote a piece critical of the Vatican, saying that it's hard to be a Catholic woman these days when church leaders are putting pressure on American nuns. Her editor warned her that the long knives would come out; a friend predicted a cross burning in her yard. Instead, among some 60 letters she's received, only two—both from men—were negative. "I am convinced that the church is not Rome," one

**“It does not matter where you come from—only where you want to go.”**

— Kennedy Odede, graduating senior at Wesleyan College, in his remarks to the senior class. Odede grew up in the largest slum in Africa, the oldest of eight children (Middletown Patch, May 28)

**“A college education isn't just a private investment. It's also a public good. This nation can't be competitive globally, nor can we have a vibrant and responsible democracy, without a large number of well-educated people.”**

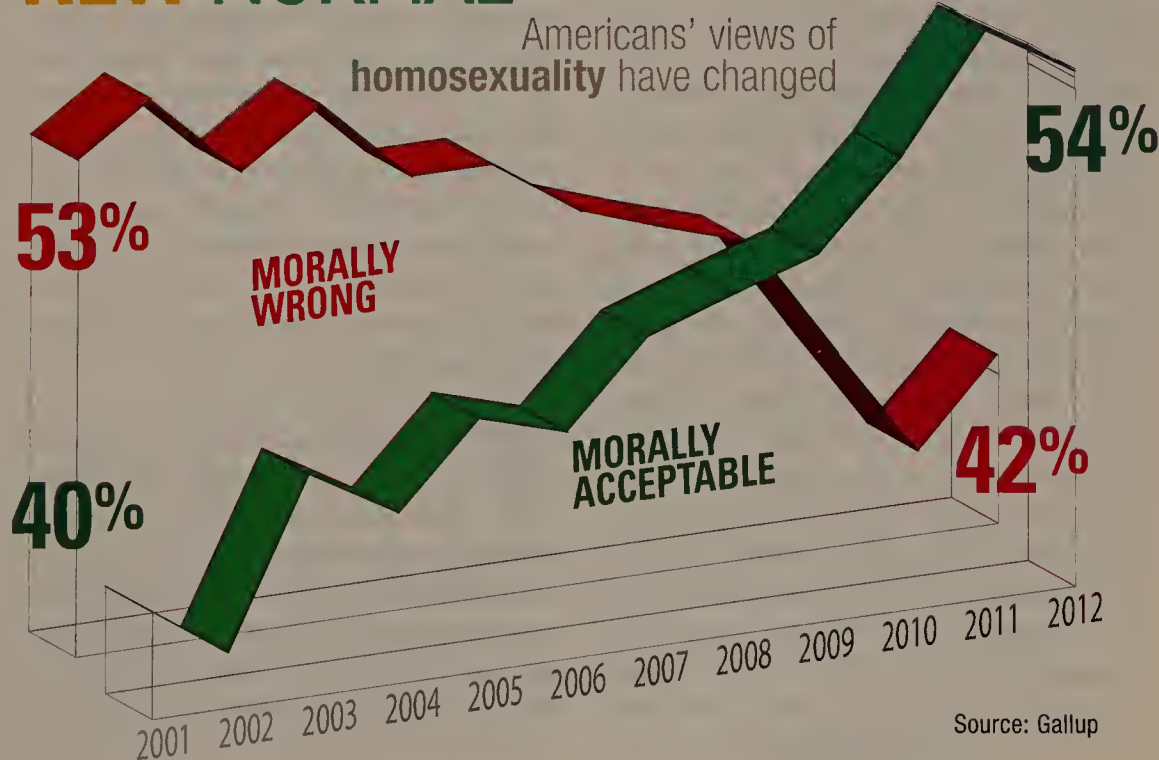
— Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, lamenting the increasing cost of higher education and the decrease in public support for it (Robert Reich's blog, May 19)

woman responded. "I am convinced that the church is the folks I worship with every Sunday, the volunteers that I work with every Saturday . . . the nuns who work in the nursing homes where my mother was a patient until she died, the volunteers who work with immigrants, both documented and undocumented" (Baltimore Sun, May 23).

**BIRTHERS:** Ken Bennett, Arizona's secretary of state, threatened to keep President Obama off the ballot this fall unless it was proved that Obama's birth certificate is not a fraud. In response, an online petition was begun,

garnering 18,000 signatures, requesting that Bennett certify that Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee, is not a unicorn. Bennett called the probe ridiculous, but he also withdrew his threat to take Obama off the ballot. In March, a California group filed a suit that would require all presidential candidates to certify their citizenship. In addition to raising the usual—and long since disproved—claim that Obama was not born in the U.S., the suit raised questions about Romney's birth certificate, since his father had spent some time as a child in Mexico (Washington Post, May 29).

## NEW NORMAL





The International Criminal Court issues a verdict

# The end of impunity?

by John Kiess

**TEN YEARS AFTER** it was founded, the International Criminal Court has issued its first decision. On March 14, the ICC—the world's first permanent tribunal with jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide—found Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga guilty of recruiting and enlisting child soldiers. He forced children as young as 11 to pick up guns and aid in ethnic cleansing in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2002–2003.

The landmark decision has been hailed as a victory for the protection of children in armed conflict and praised for its strong message to perpetrators that violations of international law will no longer go unpunished. Estonian diplomat Tiina Intelmann, the president of the Assembly of States Parties which established the ICC, declared, “We have left the age of impunity behind us and entered the age of accountability.”

For the past half-century, human rights advocates have struggled to find adequate mechanisms to punish the most serious crimes of international concern. National courts are supposed to enforce the Geneva Conventions and other humanitarian laws, but these courts are often unable or unwilling to prosecute crimes committed by high-ranking state officials. To combat impunity in these settings, the international community has periodically established ad hoc tribunals. In the aftermath of World War II, the Allied Powers set up tribunals at Nuremberg and Tokyo to prosecute Nazi and Japanese war criminals. More recently, the United Nations Security Council created international tribunals to address crimes committed in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone. It was the Special Court for Sierra Leone that in

May sentenced former Liberian president Charles Taylor to 50 years in prison.

These courts introduced important precedents such as individual criminal responsibility for international crimes, but they were partial solutions since they could only investigate crimes in specific conflicts. In the cases of Nuremberg, Tokyo and Rwanda, they punished crimes on only one side of the conflict. These limitations pointed to the need for a permanent court that could impartially investi-

gatory, the four LRA suspects—including its leader, Joseph Kony, the subject of the much-discussed Invisible Children video that went viral recently—remain at large in the Central African Republic. In 2009 the ICC made headlines by issuing its first warrant for an acting head of state, Omar al-Bashir, the president of Sudan. Wanted for genocide and crimes against humanity in Darfur, al-Bashir will face trial only in the unlikely event that a neighboring state arrests him.

## Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga is the first person to be convicted by the International Criminal Court.

gate crimes committed anywhere in the world with the authority of the international community as a whole.

Efforts to establish such a court culminated in July 1998 when 120 nations signed the Rome Statute, the legal basis for the ICC. The statute went into force four years later when 60 nations ratified the treaty. Designed as a court of last resort, the ICC prosecutes cases only when countries are unable to do so. State parties may refer cases to the ICC and the UN Security Council can also recommend cases to the prosecutor.

**T**he ICC has issued 19 warrants across seven countries, but without a police force, it has struggled to bring cases to trial. In 2005 it issued its first arrest warrants for members of the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group responsible for numerous atrocities during its rebellion against the Ugandan government. Eluding the Ugandan mili-

In the meantime, the court has tried to build momentum through cases in which governments have been more cooperative. For the past decade, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been ravaged by a brutal war that has cost millions of lives and devastated nearly every level of society. During the conflict, neighboring countries such as Rwanda and Uganda plundered Congo's vast mineral wealth and armed a number of rebel groups, which remained active after the war formally ended. Lubanga led one of these groups, the Union of Congolese Patriots, and terrorized the Ituri region of northeastern Congo in 2002 and 2003. The Congolese government eventually arrested him and transferred his case, along with two others, to The Hague.

In Ituri, reaction to the verdict has been mixed. On the one hand, many Congolese express satisfaction that a warlord is finally being held accountable; they believe that this decision will help



deter future criminals. “The ICC’s verdict is a lesson for people pursuing the politics of war in this country,” said Jean-Luc Simbiliabo, a resident who was displaced during the conflict. “Other militia leaders will now be afraid of being arrested for their crimes.”

But other Congolese complain that the ICC has been selective in its charges against Lubanga. While Lubanga was linked to numerous atrocities across the region, including mass killings, displacement and sexual violence, the court limited its case to the recruitment of child soldiers. Mike Upio, director of the Centre Médicale Évangélique in Nyankunde, remarked, “Using children and conducting this military operation against the ordinary people led to massacres. We lost many of our relatives and friends. But the ICC focused on the children and left the killings out of its investigation.”

Others have questioned the court’s focus on Lubanga while ignoring those in Uganda and Rwanda who funded and supported him. Kalisa Eliakim, a field assistant for Samaritan’s Purse, wonders why more rebel leaders have not been prosecuted, observing, “I have trouble supporting the verdict because the ICC does not appear to be impartial. Victims find that perpetrators of the same crimes in Ituri are free and now working with the government while only some are judged.” He points to the case of Bosco Ntaganda, who has been wanted by the ICC for recruiting child soldiers but has been integrated into the Congolese army and promoted to the rank of general.

In response to such criticisms, the ICC’s chief prosecutor has recently stepped up efforts to bring Ntaganda to justice, announcing that he will seek new charges of murder, ethnic persecution, sexual slavery and attacks on civilians. Moreover the Congolese government, which had previously refused to arrest Ntaganda, has indicated its willingness to put him on trial. In a country in which so many perpetrators have been integrated into the government, however, local expectations of justice will not be satisfied until others are held responsible.

Concerns about bias extend to the

ICC’s approach more broadly. Since its inception, it has only investigated situations in Africa, leading many to conclude that the court is imposing a neocolonial agenda on the continent. To many observers, the ICC’s talk of universality and accountability rings hollow when they

see the war crimes of Western leaders go unpunished. The United States—like Iran, Russia and China—has refused to ratify the Rome Statute and is not subject to its jurisdiction.

Katho Bungishabako, a biblical scholar and president of Shalom University

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## Atitlán

I don’t know if it’s Kaqchikel or Tzotujil  
they speak here. I use my small Spanish  
to haggle for a woven bracelet.  
Mark and the girls wander off,  
so I walk alone past stalls of cheap skirts  
and plastic shoes, baskets of melons,  
even a table of carved statues of the local saint,  
Maximón, with his Stetson hat and big cigar.

In a shop I’m drawn to a crucifix,  
hanging alone among the clay pots.  
The carver has nudged the local wood  
into its graceful form. Shy, he says a price—  
hardly anything—but my local cash is gone  
and my watch shows nearly noon,  
time for the last boat back.

At the dock the rest look impatient,  
the boatman drumming the motor,  
but I can think only of the pale wood,  
the stripe of darker grain in the hanging head.

The boat rides low in the water,  
and as we reach the lake’s heart—  
great craters guarding its distant shores—  
the wind comes suddenly alive.  
People have warned us  
of the lake’s treacherous afternoon *xocomil*—  
the wind that carries away sin.  
The pilot turns away. I catch Mark’s eye  
and look at our daughters in a crush of fear.

As the village shoreline shrinks,  
I remember that locals plead  
with their cowboy saint,  
offering oranges, cigarettes, and soda.  
The waves rise and we sit stiff,  
our eyes on our distant beach.  
I picture the carving, the curve  
of the corpus, the crossed feet.

No one in our boat can calm the storm.

Carol Gilbertson


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John Kiess teaches at Loyola University Maryland.

of Bunia, acknowledges these shortcomings but sees the ICC's conviction of Lubanga as the beginning of a longer process: "I know people are criticizing the ICC saying it is only for Africans, not for Americans, but for me, with the experiences we've had and everything we've been through, I think it is a beginning. We live in a region that is highly unstable. Even now we're hearing about the formation of two new militias nearby. The Lubanga decision says that they can start, but they'll end up like him. We need the process to continue for others."

Lubanga's sentencing hearing will take place on June 13, and the prosecutor has said he will seek close to the maximum sentence of 30 years (the ICC cannot impose the death penalty, but it could impose a life sentence).

Eager to deflect the criticism that it is putting Africa on trial, the ICC will likely turn its attention to other parts of the world, including Colombia and the Middle East. While it appears that the ICC will remain committed to prosecuting high-profile cases in the Congo, the burden of dealing with other war-related crimes will fall to Congo itself.

The Lubanga decision is undoubtedly a high-water mark in the enforcement of international law, but it is also a sobering reminder of how far the ICC has to go. If the court is just beginning to experience success in combating impunity among the leaders of small rebel groups, it will face an even greater challenge in trying to hold more powerful leaders accountable. After a decade of existence, the ICC's shortcomings have stirred a longing for a more genuinely international effort to prevent and punish the worst crimes, regardless of where they are committed. 

## Will Christians vote for the old regime?

# Hard choices in Egypt

by Jayson Casper

**COPTIC CHRISTIANS**, who constitute about 10 percent of Egypt's population, were in a unique position to influence the first round of the presidential elections on May 23–24, the first election ever in Egypt without a predetermined outcome. It appears that they sided primarily with a representative of the old regime.

The top two vote-getters were Ahmed Shafik, who was appointed prime minister by Hosni Mubarak in a last-ditch effort to save his position, and Mohamed Morsi, the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood. With Morsi and Shafik set to compete in a runoff election June 16–17, the election seems drawn as a competition between the old regime and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Morsi and Shafik each advanced with about 24 percent of the total, edging out Hamdeen Sabahi, who finished third. Sabahi is a long-standing opposition figure and a moderate socialist and Egyptian

nationalist. As the centrist candidacies of Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh and Amr Moussa waned, Sabahi's popularity exploded, especially among the youth, including many Copts. Fotouh is a former Brotherhood member who sought to be a bridge between Islamists and liberals. He attracted some Copts until receiving the endorsement of ultra-conservative Salafi groups, which scared many away. Moussa is a former foreign minister who fell out of favor with Mubarak, which increased his credibility. He attracted Copts who were sympathetic to the revolution but wary of drastic changes.

Youssef Sidhom, editor-in-chief of the Coptic newspaper *Watani*, estimated that about 60 percent of Christians voted for Shafik, 30 percent for Sabahi, and 10 percent for Moussa. As the votes were counted, one Sabahi campaign activist lashed out at Christians, claiming that they killed the revolution. He was quickly quieted down.

Yet is the charge true? Did Copts vote solidly for the most counter-revolutionary candidate? One must also ask: Did they feel the threat of the Brotherhood compelled them to make this decision?

For Sidhom, the choice has become clear. "The revolution is now in the hands of political Islam, and Copts must make a bitter choice to support the civil state. I expect Moussa's supporters will easily shift to Shafik, but how will we be able to convince the youth, who were so dedicated to the revolution, to do so as well?"

The youth may be hard pressed to follow his line. Bassem Victor is an Orthodox activist and one of the few Copts who have sought to bridge the gaps between the Coptic and Salafi communities. He boycotted the election and expects to boycott the run-off as well. "I cannot vote for Morsi and his Islamist project," he said, "nor can I bring myself





**SHAFIK:** Mubarak's last prime minister came in second in first-round voting.

to vote for an old regime figure because of all the sectarian incidents over the past 30 years, in which no one was brought to justice."

Joanna Azmi is a Protestant activist who expresses both confusion and disappointment at the result of the vote. "I

## Did Copts in Egypt feel so threatened that they voted for the most counter-revolutionary candidate?

don't know why the Copts supported Shafik; they are looking for stability. I don't know if the revolution was even that important to them. I don't know what to believe about Shafik either, but Copts are very afraid, and they have always been so. Plus, they often simply follow the herd in what their community thinks. It decided on Shafik, and that was that."

Boutros Salim, deputy patriarch of the Coptic Catholic Church, denies that characterization. "The church from the beginning said it was neutral to all candidates, encouraging each person to vote as their conscience dictates. We want a

civil state, and the Brotherhood has said a number of times they do also, that there is no religious state in Islam. So I cannot reject an Islamist for being an Islamist, or a member of the old regime simply because he is one. I support the principles of freedom and human rights, and those who support them. I believe this is the same stance taken by all Egyptian denominations."

Bishop Mouneer Anis of the Anglican Episcopal Church, who endorsed no candidate, said he understands why many Copts would vote for Shafik, especially in his opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. "I think Copts will not vote for Morsi because they have failed to receive any encouraging signs from Islamists. After months in parliament [the Islamists] never opened the Coptic file." Anis said that parliament "investigated the Port Said massacre [where dozens were killed at a soccer riot], and were right to do so. But they did not touch Maspero [where Copts were killed by the military while protesting] or Alexandria [where a bomb exploded at a church three weeks prior to the revolution]."

"For all these reasons there is distrust among Copts of the Muslim Brotherhood, who made no effort to build this trust except to say the Islamic

Shari'a guarantees non-Muslims their freedom. But these are words, not actions." As it happens, "Actions, not words" is the campaign slogan of Ahmed Shafik.

Despite church officials' stance of nonendorsement, Paul Anis, head of the Catholic Comboni Mission in Egypt, described interdenominational meetings organized by laity at which church leaders presented their views. "These meetings discussed all options and all candidates; even Aboul Fotouh came once. But in the end, they emphasized Shafik, though without binding this choice on anyone."



**MORSI:** The Muslim Brotherhood candidate was the top vote getter.

Nevine Girgis is an Orthodox member of the women's committee of the Social Democratic Party and is keen to avoid Islamist control of the presidency, especially in light of legislation in parliament to limit women's rights. She analyzes Shafik's supporters this way: "There has been flak in the media about Copts voting for Shafik, but many people backed him as a utilitarian choice to support the military against the Islamists. People are very depressed as citizens—as Egyptians—rather than as Muslims or Christians."

Fayez Ishak, pastor at Kasr el-Dobara Presbyterian Church near Tahrir Square, the largest Protestant church in the Middle East, said, "The Muslim Brotherhood is trying to show that Christians betrayed the revolution, but Shafik gained most of his votes in Islamist dominated areas, such as the Nile Delta, not ones with large Christian populations."

The Christian community of Egypt finds itself between the rock of the old regime and the hard place of rule by the Muslim Brotherhood. It appears likely they will choose the rock. **CC**

Jayson Casper is a writer with Arab West Report and blogs regularly at *A Sense of Belonging*.



## Churches more wary of partisan politics

With the 2012 election less than six months away, congregations are getting the message that Americans want religion out of politics. But that doesn't mean they plan to keep mum in the public square. Instead, they're revamping ways for congregations to mobilize voters by focusing on a broader set of issues than in the past. Preachers are largely avoiding the political fray, and hot-button social issues are being relegated to low-profile church study groups.

Why? For one, Americans are growing impatient with religious politicking: 54 percent want houses of worship to keep out of politics (up from 52 percent in 2008 and 43 percent in 1996), according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Churches seem to be responding.

"The biggest change we see is a drop-off in the percentage of people saying they hear politics from the pulpit," said David Campbell, a University of Notre Dame political scientist whose Faith Matters project tracked 3,100 people over five years. "It's been happening everywhere," Campbell added. "People say they don't want to hear about politics in church, and they're actually hearing less of it."

That doesn't mean the public is clamoring for a totally secularized public square. Some believe that the backlash is against a particular type of religious activism that aligns closely with one party's agenda or set of candidates.

"When people say they want religious organizations out of politics, they mean religious organizations telling people who to vote for," said Gordon Whitman, director of public policy for PICO, a national network of more than 1,000 faith-based organizations. "We find . . .

lots of consensus that our religious values should inform our positions on issues."

In April, PICO launched a national campaign to enlist congregations in registering low-income voters and championing multiple issues of "economic justice." Missouri pastors are now leading efforts to cap payday lending rates at 36 percent. Minnesota clergy are rallying parishioners and others to oppose a new voter ID initiative, which they say would disenfranchise low-income residents and others who lack state-issued ID cards.

For religious conservatives, social issues still matter in 2012, but they're not always being billed as top priorities. Hispanic evangelicals, for instance, criticized President Obama in early May for supporting same-sex marriage, and they

remain opposed to abortion, but those concerns won't trump the more pressing matter of immigration reform, which could lead to endorsements for Obama and for Democrats running for Congress.

That's according to Miguel Rivera, chairman of the board for the National Coalition of Latino Clergy and Christian Leaders, whose membership includes leaders from 16,000 churches.

"We are very happy with the outcome of the referendum [banning gay marriage] in North Carolina," Rivera said. "But we hope our politicians will understand that this type of agenda is no longer acceptable if we want our country to unite again and work for the betterment of our communities."

The National Association of Evangelicals plans to use soft-sell techniques



**PUBLIC STANCES:** Clergy gather at California's state capitol to launch their Land of Opportunity initiative—a civic engagement program started by PICO National Network to register and turn out voters on the basis of economic justice issues. PICO clergy in ten states have launched similar programs and plan to contact 1 million voters before November.



in mobilizing its 45,000 churches to impact votes. Churches won't receive candidate scorecards, which "are often thinly disguised partisan devices," according to Galen Carey, NAE's vice president for government relations. Instead, they'll be equipped with resources for studying what the Bible says about such issues as immigration and marriage.

"Churches are wary of becoming involved in a very partisan way, or campaigning on issues that might be controversial, because their mission is to reach their whole communities," Carey said.

Religious involvement in partisan politics is driving Americans, especially those under 35, away from organized religion, according to Campbell. Some rising evangelical leaders see this young adult drift, documented in this year's Millennial Values Survey, as a factor that makes nonpartisanship a practical necessity.

"The last generation of Christians saw [the two major parties] as strategic allies in pushing their agendas," said Jonathan Merritt, the 29-year-old evangelical author of *A Faith of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars*. "The next generation is reconsidering how that has blinded us and harmed us."

Being nonpartisan is proving a tricky task in the political arena. For example, when Pastor Paul Slack of New Creation Church in Minneapolis makes a faith-based case against a voter ID initiative in Minnesota, he frames it as fighting against a GOP agenda.

"It's politically motivated," Slack said at an April press conference. "Voter ID is designed intentionally to make it harder for certain Minnesotans to vote. . . . We need to get more people at the polls so they can take part in sharing the common life together because that is indeed a value of our faith."

Come October, however, all bets for nonpartisanship will be off, at least in churches participating in Pulpit Freedom Sunday. The Alliance Defense Fund is urging pastors to preach October 7 on political issues and endorse specific candidates in defiance of Internal Revenue Service codes for tax-exempt institutions. More than 250 pastors have already signed up, including Ron

Johnson Jr., senior pastor of Living Stones Church in Crown Point, Indiana.

Churchgoers "have the opportunity to vote with their feet," said Johnson, who preached in 2008 on why he believed that voting for Obama would be immoral. He's now running for state representative. "If they don't like the messaging, then they don't have to worship in our congregation." —G. Jeffrey MacDonald, RNS

## Atheists, believers do good for different reasons

Atheists and others who don't adhere to a religion often say they can be good without God. Now three new studies appear to back them up.

Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, conducted three experiments showing that less-religious people perform acts of generosity more from feelings of compassion than do more-religious people. The findings were published in the current issue of the online journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Their results challenge traditional thinking about what drives religious people to perform acts of kindness for others. "The main takeaway from the research is that there may be very different reasons why more and less religious people behave generously when they do," said Robb Willer, an assistant professor of sociology at Berkeley and a coauthor of the studies.

"Across three studies, we found compassion played a much bigger role in the way that less-religious people treated others. Religious people, in contrast, tended to behave as generously as they would regardless of how compassionately they felt."

At the same time, Willer said, views of nonreligious people as cold and amoral need adjustment. "We find that nonreligious people do feel compassion for others, and that those feelings are strongly related to whether they choose to help others or not."

The goal of the studies was to determine what drives people's "prosocial" behaviors—acts intended to help others.

In the first experiment, researchers analyzed a national survey of more than 1,000 U.S. adults. Those who agreed with the statement, "When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them," said they were more inclined to act generously toward those people—giving them a seat on a bus, for example, or lending them a belonging.

"These findings indicate that although compassion is associated with prosociality among both less-religious and more-religious individuals, this relationship is particularly robust for less-religious individuals," the researchers wrote.

In the second experiment, 101 American adults were shown two videos, one neutral and one depicting poverty-stricken children. They were then given ten "lab dollars" and told that they could give any or all of it to a stranger. The less religious in the study gave more of the dollars away.

The third experiment involved more than 200 college students who were asked how compassionate they felt. They then played a game in which they were given money to share or keep, and were told that another player had given a portion of his money to them. The players could reward the giver by giving back some of the money, which had doubled. The less religious who reported high feelings of compassion were more inclined to share their winnings than other participants.

But to read the results of these studies as a condemnation of religious people would be a mistake, Willer said. "We did not find that less-religious people were more compassionate or generous than more-religious people," he said. "This wasn't what our research was about."

"What we were studying were the different reasons why more- and less-religious people behave generously or not. And we guessed that less-religious people are more driven by compassion, and that's what we found. So we're not saying that less-religious people are more generous, we're saying they're generous for different reasons."

Brian Howell, an associate professor of anthropology at Wheaton College, a flagship evangelical school, said the



results of the Berkeley study did not surprise him.

“They did not find that nonreligious people were more generous overall, just that they needed emotional responses to be generous more than religious people do,” he said. “So all those TV ads of starving children are important for the nonreligious to give money, but not so much for the religious.”

Howell cited anthropological research among U.S. evangelicals that shows their decisions to be generous can involve God’s expectations of human behavior. “They want to be, as they would say, ‘good stewards’ of their giving,” Howell continued. “Though compassion is part of this, I think a lot of religious people would not report that as central to their decision making because they would want to know that their giving is going to support long-term, even eternal, priorities of God.”

The Berkeley researchers suggest that people who are more religious may base their generosity less on feelings of compassion and more on “doctrine, communal identity, or reputational concerns.” —Kimberly Winston, RNS

## Nuns rap Vatican for ‘unsubstantiated’ charges

Leaders representing most of the nation’s 57,000 Catholic nuns answered a Vatican crackdown on their group by charging that Rome’s criticisms of the sisters were “unsubstantiated,” caused “scandal and pain” and “greater polarization” in the church.

“Moreover, the sanctions imposed were disproportionate to the concerns raised and could compromise their ability to fulfill their mission,” the 22-member board of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious warned June 1 in a statement issued after a special four-day meeting in Washington.

The LCWR board meeting followed the surprise announcement in April that Pope Benedict XVI wanted a Vatican-led makeover of the group on the grounds that it was not speaking out strongly enough against gay marriage, abortion and women’s ordination.

Rome also chided the LCWR for doctrinal ambiguity and sponsoring conferences that featured “a prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith.”

The unexpectedly strong pushback to the Vatican may be an indication of how much backlash the campaign has sparked among Catholics, who value the sisters’ long-standing ministry in education, health care and social services and who bristle at Rome’s demands to focus instead on sexual morality and enforcing orthodoxy.

The nuns have received an outpouring of support, from petitions to protests to prayer vigils, and affirmations continued to pour in after the LCWR statement. “We commend the sisters on their prayerful discernment of the Vatican’s mandate,” said Jim Fitzgerald of the Nun Justice Project, a lay-led church reform group that was created after the April takeover was announced. “It speaks to the faithfulness of the sisters and the reason why Catholics across the country continue to stand behind them.”

In an interview June 1 with the *National Catholic Reporter*, LCWR president Pat Farrell, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis in Dubuque, Iowa, said that in raising doctrinal and theological issues the nuns in her organization have also been reflecting a wider conversation among Catholics in the church—and one that often finds no other outlet in officialdom.

“The insinuation that I think many people could draw from reading that Vatican document is that if we raise those questions, we’re unfaithful to the church,” Farrell said. “That’s not true. And I don’t think that’s really fair. I think, in fact, that that is a sign of our deepest faithfulness to the church—questions that the people of God need to raise, that we need to talk about together in a climate of genuine dialogue.”

The LCWR response comes as Benedict faces an enormous public relations headache over the leak of sensitive documents that reveal his Roman curia to be a dysfunctional bureaucracy riven by backroom plotting and politicking.

In pointed contrast to the unflattering reports coming out of the Vatican, the

LCWR said the standoff must be “addressed by the entire church community in an atmosphere of openness, honesty and integrity.” —David Gibson, RNS

## Vatican censures nun’s book on sexual ethics

A long-simmering conflict between the Vatican and American nuns has erupted again with the Vatican’s doctrinal office issuing a scathing critique of a popular book on sexual ethics by Sister Margaret A. Farley, one of the first Catholics to teach at Yale Divinity School.

After two years of study, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published on June 4 a “notification” on Farley’s *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, saying it contradicts Catholic doctrine on key issues such as gay marriage, homosexuality and divorce.

Farley, who retired from YDS in 2007 as a professor emerita, had maintained that her book was not intended to state official Catholic teaching but rather to give readers her personal ideas that might help them “think through their



**FLASHPOINT:** Sister Margaret A. Farley’s book *Just Love* has been heavily criticized by the Vatican for its stances on issues such as gay marriage, homosexuality and divorce.

COURTESY YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL



questions about human sexuality.” Past president of both the Society of Christian Ethics and the Catholic Theological Society, Farley won the prestigious Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion in 2008 for *Just Love*.

Coming just days after U.S. nuns rejected the Vatican’s reasoning for a wholesale makeover of female religious orders and a year after American bishops sanctioned another nun theologian, the condemnation of Farley is the latest example of what critics see as a top-down attempt to muzzle women’s voices and an obsession with sexual ethics.

Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain—appointed by the Vatican to oversee the reform of the largest umbrella organization of Catholic sisters in the U.S.—had extended what appeared to be an olive branch to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious “in an atmosphere of openness, honesty, integrity and fidelity to the church’s faith.” But his conciliatory tone was quickly overshadowed by the new condemnation issued by Rome of yet another American nun.

The notification says Farley’s book “ignores” or “contradicts” Catholic teaching, presenting it as “one opinion among others,” and warns that it should not be “used as a valid expression of Catholic teaching, either in counseling and formation, or in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.”

The notification was approved by Pope Benedict XVI on March 16. The Vatican’s doctrinal office singled out masturbation, homosexuality and marriage as specific areas of concern in *Just Love*.

For example, Farley writes that “masturbation . . . usually does not raise any moral questions at all,” and that homosexual acts “can be justified” following the same ethics as heterosexual ones. The Vatican statement retorts that “masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action” and that homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered” and “contrary to natural law.”

Farley also voices doubts over the “indissolubility” of marriage and argues that laws recognizing gay marriage can play an important part in reversing widespread “hatred . . . and stigmatization of gays and lesbians,” a position that is “opposed to the teaching of the magisterium,” according to the Vatican.

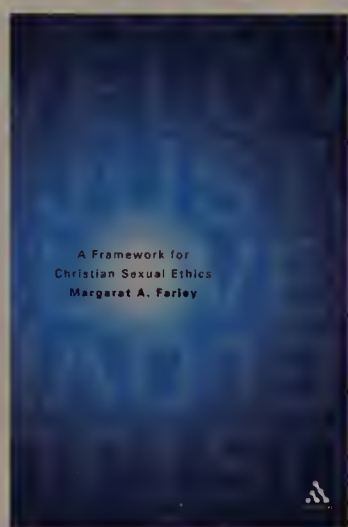
Farley, a member of the Sisters of Mercy, taught at Yale from 1971 to 2007. In a statement, Farley stressed that her book’s intent was to present a modern “framework for sexual ethics” drawing on the input of current experience and different religious traditions. She says she is convinced that her positions “reflect a deep coherence with the central aims and insights” of Christian theology and tradition and contends that the Vatican ignored the reasons and context that led to her conclusions.

Other Catholic theologians seem to agree. M. Shawn Copeland, a theology professor at Boston College, called the Vatican notification “deeply disappointing and most disturbing,” saying that Farley’s research is “notable” for its “distinguishing of practical and speculative questions from magisterial or official teaching.”

Paul Lakeland, director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, called Farley a “careful and caring” theologian, adding that “it is the vocation of Catholic theologians and ethicists to work on the boundaries” of current doctrine.

The notification on Farley’s book comes in the wake of last year’s controversial condemnation of feminist theologian Sister Elizabeth Johnson by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and seems to be part of an effort to rein in theologians who stray too far from the path of Catholic orthodoxy.

In March, a Vatican panel stated that while “investigation and questioning” by theologians are “justified and even necessary,” the final word on the “authentic interpretation” of the Catholic faith ultimately belongs to bishops. —Alessandro Speciale, RNS



## Bible scholars back more critical studies of Qur'an

The Society of Biblical Literature, the largest international body of scholars of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and related texts, hopes to assist experts on the Qur'an in creating an independent body for fostering research on Islam's holiest book.

The SBL announced May 29 that it was awarded a \$140,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation to provide travel expenses, meeting space and other assistance over a three-year period, allowing scholars to explore creation of such a network.

“It cannot be overstated that the agenda of the scholars in this consultation will not be directed by the SBL,” said John Kutsko, executive director of the Atlanta-based biblical society. The guidelines aim to allow scholars “to set their own research and publishing agendas” that may transcend institutional and international lines, he said.

“The level of interest in the Qur'an and Islam in the West today is unprecedented,” said Emran El-Badawi, assistant professor of Arab studies at the University of Houston and codirector of the consultation. Although a growing number of websites and online forums discuss the meaning and interpretation of the Qur'an, “no learned society dedicated to the study of the Qur'an exists,” El-Badawi said.

The envisioned Society for Qur'anic Studies would encourage scholars of various perspectives to present “cutting edge research on the Qur'an's language, its dialogue with other scriptures and the context in which the text arose,” said the other codirector, Gabriel Said Reynolds, an associate professor of Islamic studies and theology at the University of Notre Dame.

“By approaching the Qur'an as a historical, literary and religious text,” Reynolds said, the society will demonstrate the “wide-ranging scholarly value of the Qur'an.”

The first formal meeting of the ten-member steering committee will take place in Chicago in mid-November during the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion.



# How 'pro-life' is dissident Chen Guangcheng?

**WHEN BLIND** Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng made a daring escape from house arrest this spring and found refuge in the U.S. embassy in Beijing, he instantly became a popular hero in the West and a rallying point for human rights activists everywhere.

For abortion opponents in the U.S., however, Chen was much more than that: he was an icon of the pro-life cause, a man whose campaign against forced abortion in China made him a potent champion in the fight against legal abortion in America.

Antiabortion groups in the U.S. regularly cited Chen in their press releases and fund-raising materials, using Chen's plight—and the slow pace of the diplomatic negotiations that eventually brought him to safety in New York—as fodder for promoting their cause and galvanizing opposition to President Obama.

Conservative media critic Terry Mattingly even detected a secular bias in the news coverage, complaining that reports were ignoring the fact that Chen "is actually a pro-life activist" and a "Christian activist who sees China's often brutal one-child policy as a violation of human rights as well as religious liberty."

But the reality differs significantly from the scenario laid out by Mattingly and others: for one thing, Chen Guangcheng is not a Christian, and, more notably, he may not even be what most abortion opponents would consider pro-life.

That's because Chen's cause in China was not an effort to halt legal abortion per se but to make Chinese authorities comply with their own laws against forced abortions and sterilizations, a position also advocated by the Obama administration. "If it's not forced abortion, I don't think he's necessarily against that," said Bob Fu, a Chinese-born Christian and close friend of Chen who heads Texas-based China Aid, which lobbies for religious freedom in China.

Chen would not oppose "voluntary

abortion," Fu said, since Chen's focus is on "the rule of law"—on making China a society that respects its own laws, which are routinely flouted, and on promoting the human rights and dignity of its citizens.

In Chen's two principal public statements since arriving in New York on May 19—an interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper and an op-ed in the *New York Times* on May 30—Chen himself did not mention abortion. Instead, he repeatedly stressed that the "fundamental question the Chinese government must face is lawlessness," as he wrote in the *Times*. "China does not lack laws, but the rule of law."

Chen was initially targeted by Chinese authorities in 2005 after he filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of poor rural women who said they were subjected to forced abortions and sterilizations as part of China's one-child policy. That landed him in jail until 2010, and he was then placed under house arrest, which he escaped on April 22, injuring his foot but still managing to reach the U.S. embassy.

That prompted an international crisis that was only resolved when Chen and his wife were allowed to travel on student visas to New York, where he has pledged to continue speaking out for the rule of law in his homeland.

"In the U.S., 'pro-life' connotes opposition to abortion per se, so Chen isn't an antiabortion activist in the U.S. sense," as Lindsay Beyerstein wrote in the online magazine *Religion Dispatches*.

Fu echoed that point. "It's very hard to place him [Chen] in a category here."

Still, that hasn't stopped some abortion opponents from trying. "Obama administration abandons Chinese pro-life activist Chen," ran a headline at the Right Wing News site at the height of the diplomatic standoff in May. "Chen is not the kind of activist that American authorities would have wanted to help," blogger Julio Severo wrote at LifeSiteNews.

"Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are shamelessly pro-abortion, while Chen is pro-life."

The National Right to Life Committee has cited Chen in fund-raising appeals, telling supporters that nothing they contribute "will cost nearly as much as what brave activists like Chen Guangcheng have been forced to give." And Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council welcomed news of Chen's flight to New York by hoping that "Chen's influence extends to his

new home, where the inhumanity of abortion is so often ignored."

Whether Chen can avoid being swept up in America's culture wars and election-year battles is unclear. Marjorie Dannenfelser, head of the Susan B. Anthony List, told the *Washington Post* that she is unsure of Chen's general views on abortion, adding: "What we will not do is take

his suffering and his family's suffering and use it for a cause he doesn't believe in."

Chen's advisers have also been counseling him on how to avoid the political pitfalls, especially as he continues to recuperate from his foot injury and from the toll taken by years of confinement and abuse. But he has already been asked to tell his story in Congress, and friends say Chen has been swamped with invitations to speak at antiabortion rallies and to churches and religious groups.

"In the end, though, he'll have to decide what he'll want to say," Jerome A. Cohen, codirector of New York University's U.S.-Asia Law Institute and a friend and adviser to Chen, told the *Post*.

Chen may wind up being more supportive of religious groups and abortion opponents than his record so far indicates. Fu noted that almost all of Chen's friends in China were Christians who faced government repression and said Chen himself might be considered a believer in "natural religion."

"He's sort of a natural pro-lifer," Fu added. The question is whether that will be pro-life enough for American pro-lifers. —David Gibson, RNS



Chen Guangcheng

U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



## Richard Land loses show, keeps his leadership job

A top Southern Baptist official who was accused of plagiarism in a radio segment claiming that civil rights leaders and President Obama used the Trayvon Martin case to stir racial tensions has lost his weekly call-in program but can keep his main job, a church panel has announced.

Richard Land, the influential head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and the denomination's top policy spokesman, was rebuked for racial insensitivity and for not attributing the source of his radio commentaries after a review by ERLC trustees.

The controversy over Land's explosive remarks in a March 31 radio program was especially awkward as Southern Baptists were expected to elect an African-American pastor, Fred Luter, as the denomination's first black president this month.

The investigators chided Land for "his hurtful, irresponsible, insensitive and racially charged words" in a broadcast of the *Richard Land Live!* show in which he accused Obama and black civil rights activists such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton of using the Trayvon Martin shooting to foment racial strife and boost the president's reelection chances.

Martin is the 17-year-old unarmed black youth who was shot to death in February by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida. Martin was walking back to his father's house with a bag of candy and an iced tea when he was confronted by George Zimmerman, who was patrolling the gated community where Martin was staying. Zimmerman is awaiting trial on second-degree murder charges that were filed after a public outcry led authorities to investigate the case.

Land initially dismissed criticism of the racial tenor of his comments, but two weeks later it emerged that his comments were lifted from a *Washington Times* column without attribution. Faced with a growing outcry,

Land issued an apology for the Martin comments, and Southern Baptist leaders announced they would launch an investigation.

It is not clear whether the SBC findings announced June 1 will calm the storm.

Ten days before, the head of the five-member investigating committee resigned, reportedly to spend more time volunteering for his church. His replacement immediately expressed support for Land and a desire to see him continue "his ministry." In the findings, trustees said that the "content and purpose" of Land's radio program were "not congruent with the mission of the ERLC" and that it would be terminated as soon as the broadcast contract allowed.

However, the trustees also said that in reading material without attribution, Land was "accepting practices that occur in the radio industry," albeit "unwisely." They praised Land for his apologies and said he "exhibited a very compliant spirit and was fully cooperative during the investigation."

"Damage was done to the state of race relations in the Southern Baptist Convention," the investigating committee said. "We recognize that there is more work to do before the members of Southern Baptist congregations are as diverse as the citizens of our great nation. We and Dr. Land remain dedicated to that cause."

For his part, Land said that the review "was conducted in a Christian manner by Christian gentlemen" and that he looked forward to continuing with his work as ERLC head.

Whether Land's reprimand and Luter's impending election can change the racial dynamics for the SBC is uncertain. A number of Baptist leaders and experts noted that Land is a veritable institution in the SBC and that Luter will serve as president for no more than two years—hardly enough time to give him the kind of visibility and influence that Land enjoys.

Luter initially called Land's radio remarks "unhelpful" but later added, "I don't think you should throw out a lifetime of doing good because of one mistake." —David Gibson, RNS

## Briefly noted

■ A small Presbyterian church in West Hollywood, California, renowned decades ago for its openness to gay worshipers and its ministry to those afflicted with AIDS, was given permission May 12 to leave the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and to affiliate with the United Church of Christ. A number of conservative congregations have negotiated releases from the PCUSA since the denomination voted last year to open the ministry to gay and lesbian clergy. PCUSA officials believe that the West Hollywood church is the first congregation to leave the PCUSA because the denomination was regarded as too conservative, particularly for barring ministers from conducting same-sex marriages. Pastor Daniel Smith said, "It's like being released from an abusive relationship."

■ The National Council of Churches has installed Peg Birk, a management consultant, lawyer and an active United Church of Christ laywoman, as transitional general secretary for an 18-month period as the ecumenical council looks for ways to cope with diminishing financial resources. Birk, president and CEO of Interim Solutions, Minneapolis, was recommended to the NCC board by a search committee chaired by Mark S. Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

■ Israeli archaeologists have said they have unearthed in Jerusalem the earliest artifact containing the name Bethlehem in the form of a clay seal called a bulla. "This is the first time the name Bethlehem appears outside the Bible, in an inscription from the First Temple period, which proves that Bethlehem was indeed a city in the kingdom of Judah and possibly also in earlier periods," said Eli Shukron, director of the excavation on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, which announced the discovery in late May. The seal, dating from the seventh or eighth century BC, was found just outside the Old City of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is first mentioned in Genesis in connection with the burial place of the matriarch Rachel. It is also the city where David was anointed king in Samuel I.



# LIVING BY The Word

*Sunday, July 1*

*2 Corinthians 8:7-15*

**IN THE LANGUID** days of midsummer, when church financial income is at low ebb, it is a comfort to remember that Paul too had stewardship issues in his churches. It's not a new phenomenon. It turns out that every generation of Christians has managed to find something else to do with their hard-earned money besides offer it to the work of the body of Christ. Every generation of Christians has struggled to balance their own needs and financial security with the needs of the church.

The stewardship sermon is as old as the church itself.

Paul had a problem in Corinth. The collection that he'd been gathering from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia, which was an important symbol of the legitimacy of his gentile mission, had hit a roadblock. It seems that some of the Corinthians were withholding their financial support from the larger church. The year before they'd been eager to lead this campaign for the Jerusalem church, but now their zeal had waned. For whatever reason, their contributions were not living up to their promises. They were sitting on their wallets.

Paul needed a good stewardship sermon.

But he was careful not to threaten or coerce the Corinthians. He did not say that their failure to participate in this collection indicated that they had no part in Christ. He did not say that his words were a commandment, or that the people were required to give in order to be included in the body of Christ and be saved. He made no impossible promises to them. Paul did not suggest that their well-being was in any way tied to their eagerness to contribute. He never said that things would go better with them, that they would be blessed or that any reward would come to them as a result of their generosity. He did not preach the prosperity gospel, that contemporary lie that suggests that if you give to God, then God will give back to you in some divine multiple—as if stewardship were really venture capital with a guaranteed return.

Paul did not manipulate them or threaten them. He never said they had to pay their fair share, or that they owed him something for all he had done for them. He didn't sell the naming rights to the new fellowship hall in Jerusalem, or offer them a plaque on the communion table or a baptismal font in memory of a grandmother. He didn't sell bricks on the sidewalk outside the sanctuary in the old city or propose a donor roll to hang in the hallway. He resorted to none of the fund-raising techniques that are commonplace today.

That's not stewardship. That's not why we contribute to the work of the saints and the life of the body of Christ. Paul is certain about that.

What Paul does, and does for every stewardship preacher who comes after him, is tell the story. He tells them about Jesus. He rehearses the gospel. He reminds the Corinthians who they are and grounds their generosity in the incarnation. "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." You remember, don't you, says Paul, that Jesus gave up the power and riches of heavenly glory in order to take on human flesh to set you free, to ransom you from sin and death, to redeem your lives from slavery to the flesh, to make this abundant and blessed and hopeful new life possible for you. Christ left the palace to live with you in the village; he emptied himself of the treasure that was his at the right hand of God in order to make the treasure of his spirit available for all people, even you gentiles.

For Paul and for us, generosity is not a choice we make, not a calculation in which we weigh what we are giving up against what we gain in order to make ourselves available to the work of God's kingdom. It is a mark of our identity in Christ. When we are baptized into the one who is self-emptying we take on that self-emptying generosity for ourselves. It becomes who we are, not what we do. The people of this God, known to us in this self-emptying Christ, are self-emptying people. It is a mark of our union to Christ, who himself laid down his divine glory and became poor for us so that we might know God's love and grace and redemption.

A congregation that is able to gather the resources to extend itself into the community in new and unexpected ways is not the result of trustworthy leadership or well-executed campaigns. Faithful generosity is a sign of a people who know the gospel, who remember who they are and are determined to follow the self-emptying one and share in the life that Christ offers them.

Our challenge is not stewardship—we are very good at math; we know what we can afford. We can calculate what percentage of our hard-earned money we think the church deserves or needs or can get by on. We know what is in the church budget, where the money goes and what we aren't able to afford.

Rather, our challenge is about who we are—a people who are a self-emptying people because we are joined to a self-emptying God. Generosity is not a discipline or a spiritual gift: it is part of our character. It is who we become in baptism and who God calls us to be, together, for the further glory of his holy name.



# Reflections on the lectionary

**Sunday, July 8**

**2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10; Mark 6:1–13**

**THE GPS GOT US LOST** three times as my wife and I drove over the mountain trying to find a restaurant that our innkeepers called the best in the county. When we finally found the “town,” there was no town to speak of but only a bend in the road, a bridge, a couple of houses, a railroad trestle and an old general store. We later learned that it used to be a thriving town—before the flood of 1901 washed almost everything downstream.

I drove through the town and out the other end. No restaurant. I turned around and drove back down the hillside, looking more closely to the right and to the left. Still nothing except the houses and the run-down general store. But wait, the window of the store had “restaurant” painted on it. Really? I don’t know much about the restaurant business, but I know you have to have a certain amount of volume to maintain quality. This building looked abandoned. It hadn’t been painted since the flood—perhaps since Noah’s flood.

Maybe we had built up our expectations too high. While our son was away at camp we thought we would sneak away for a couple of nights in the mountains, eat a little good food and celebrate 20 years of marriage. Well, we decided, if a remodeled general store was the best the county had to offer, at least the company would be good even if the food was ordinary.

Sure enough, the walls were lined with shelves filled with reproductions and general merchandise from a bygone age. A waitress greeted us warmly and showed us to a table. Then we saw the menu. An 8-oz. locally sourced filet with chipotle butter and marinated onions; venison with kiwi puree and cremini mushrooms; lobster pot pie. In an old general store in the mountains? Who cooks like this out here? More puzzling, who eats like this out here?

That is what happens to the people of Nazareth when Jesus comes home for worship. They are, Mark says, astounded at how Jesus teaches. They are amazed at his reputation. But they know better than to trust that an ordinary person like Jesus could be the bringer of such powerful truth. This is not how they expected to hear God announce the arrival of the kingdom. This is not the agent of God’s redemption that they had been looking for. This is just Jesus. He is the son of the carpenter and the brother of other ordinary guys from right here in Nazareth. Jesus’ problem in Nazareth is that he doesn’t look

remarkable enough. He is too common to be the Messiah. Too ordinary to be extraordinary.

Surely we will know the Messiah when we see him, they must have assumed. There’s no way God could send the promised deliverer among us and we would miss him. We know what we are looking for. It is all some of us think about. God has told us what the Messiah will do. We are very clear about this, and Jesus, from here in Nazareth, does not fit the bill.

Of course God could have sent a more conventional messiah to his people, one who would meet some of their expectations. They would have more easily believed a savior who was born to a well-connected family in Jerusalem, who was groomed for the role from a young age, who had institutional credentials. A scribe, maybe. A soldier, perhaps—someone well-versed in the law and politically connected.

But the arrival of a recognizable, conventional messiah would have made a very different story than the one lived by Jesus and his disciples. The redemption would have been very different as well. Far less radical. Far less audacious. Far less redemptive.

Only a conventional God could send a conventional messiah to redeem his people, and this is not a conventional God. This is the God of Abraham, the childless old man who would become the father of a great nation. This is the God of Shiphrah and Puah, the fearless midwives who thwarted

## Jesus’ problem in Nazareth is that he looks so ordinary.

Pharaoh’s genocidal intentions. This is the God of David, the youngest who was out tending the sheep while his brothers were auditioning to be king. So this God’s Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon.

Conventional wisdom says it can’t be so, but we are witnesses of an unconventional truth.

This is very good news for you and me and the whole church because, in all in honesty, we do not strike a particularly imposing figure on the cultural landscape at present. We too are unlikely agents of God’s redemptive purpose. Maybe we should embrace that reality instead of straining against it, for this God we serve has a history of accomplishing unconventional things through unconventional, unlikely, unexpected servants.

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# A hopeful universalism

by Paul Dafydd Jones

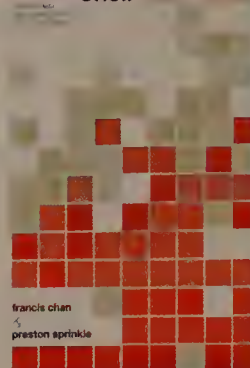
OF THE VARIOUS RESPONSES to Rob Bell's *Love Wins*, two struck me as particularly important. On one side, a number of prominent conservatives opted for splenetic denunciation. For Bell to extol God's transformative love in prose that both charms and exasperates—well, OK. No harm, no foul. But a gentle nod toward universal salvation? Absolutely *not*. John Piper's much-publicized quip on Twitter ("Farewell, Rob Bell") was probably as much a prediction of Bell's postmortem standing as an anathematization. On the other side, little more than a bored, smug shrug emanated from mainstream academics and mainline Protestants—so bored it hardly amounted to a shrug, so smug it implied that those still opposing universalism were no more than reactionary Neanderthals. This (non)reaction barely registered, but that's all the more telling. In certain circles, universalism is no longer the preserve of theological radicals. It's gone mainstream.

Although these reactions merit consideration (what does it say about contemporary Protestantism that limited salvation is a test of faith *and* irrelevant?), the concern of this essay is theological: How might Christians think better about universalism? Given that many of us are neither ardent proponents of double predestination nor so confident in our knowledge of God's saving actions that we know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that everyone will gain admittance to the heavenly kingdom, what should we say about the scope of salvation? After *Love Wins*, where do we turn for guidance?

In *Erasing Hell*, Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle offer an evangelical riposte to Rob Bell. There is no scriptural support, they argue, for the belief that God will save each and every one of us. On the contrary, the Bible insists that an absence of faith has terrible consequences. Jesus himself described "hell as a horrifying place, characterized by suffering, fire, darkness, and lamentation"—and did so "to stir a fear in us that would cause us to take hell seriously and avoid it at all costs." How, then, might one escape a fate worse than death? By committing and recommitting oneself to God, who offers salvation through Jesus Christ. And this must be done straightaway. "The door is open *now*—but it won't stay open forever."

This defense of populist neo-Arminianism—that is, the belief that a decision of faith is needed to complete the salvific process that God initiates; and when this decision is not forthcoming, people consign themselves to perdition—may not receive a warm welcome in some circles. But it should not be

erasinghell



## Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We've Made Up

By Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle  
David C. Cook, 208 pp., \$14.99 paperback

## The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment (third edition, fully updated, revised and expanded)

By Edward William Fudge  
Wipf and Stock, 420 pp., \$46.00 paperback

## Who Will Be Saved?

By William H. Willimon  
Abingdon, 176 pp., \$16.00 paperback

dismissed as a mere apology for the "turn or burn" crowd. Beyond focusing attention on the subjective side of salvation, *Erasing Hell* distinguishes itself with a respectful critique of different kinds of universalism, some decent exegetical work and a laudable resolve to connect faith and social justice. ("Racism, greed, misplaced assurance, false teaching, misuse of wealth, and degrading words to a fellow human being—these are the things that damn people to hell? According to Scripture, the answer is yes.")

The authors show, too, that they have learned something from Karl Barth: they recognize that easy presumptions about God's identity and actions typically lead theology astray. To think well, Christians must focus their energies on the concrete fact of revelation, made available through the biblical texts. They must take their bearings from God's self-presentation; they must beware the temptation to conceive of God according to all-too-human standards.

Still, at least two significant problems remain. First, *Erasing Hell* doesn't really address the shortcomings of much neo-Arminian theology. Scriptural references to the salvation of "all" (Romans 5:18, for example) are handled in a cursory manner; the connection between God's gracious activity and the human decision for faith is unclear to the point that faith looks more like a work than a divine gift; and the

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focus on individual piety is such that God's formation of communities suffers neglect.

Second, Chan and Sprinkle's commitment to thinking with Barth doesn't go far enough, since fundamental terms in their text (sin, salvation, damnation, heaven, and hell particularly) aren't keyed to the person and work of Christ. A good example of this comes late in the book, when the authors write that "Jesus satisfied the wrath of God . . . the same wrath that ultimately will be satisfied, *either* in hell *or* on the cross" (my emphasis). Why the either/or? Primarily because Chan and Sprinkle balk at one of Barth's most profound intuitions: that Christ's death is the death of sin as such; that, by way of the cross, God rejects and overcomes all wrongdoing. On this reckoning, the cross is a decisive articulation of God's wrath—a

## We cannot suppose that God's love is permissive, overlooking our failings.

decisive no against sin that ensures that the positive yes of grace sweeps slowly but surely and savingly toward each and every one of us. Indeed, isn't this what Paul meant when he wrote that "as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:21–22)?

Had Chan and Sprinkle followed Barth (and Paul!) at this point, something more interesting than populist neo-Arminianism might have emerged: a perspective that rejects the binary of saved or damned and instead views the cross as a pivotal moment in God's determination to relate graciously to sinners.

First published in 1982 and recently revised, updated and expanded, *The Fire That Consumes* provides an intriguing counterpoint to *Erasing Hell*. Edward William Fudge is no populist neo-Arminian. His iteration of North American evangelicalism has roots in the Calvinist tradition, but with an intriguing twist: Fudge offers a strong critique of the traditional claim that the reprobate—that is, sinners who do not receive God's saving grace—may be consigned to a hell of "unending conscious tor-

ment." In its place, Fudge advocates for annihilationism: the belief that the wicked will eventually be extinguished, subject to a "second death" in the consuming fire of judgment.

What reasons might one have for adopting this view? Biblical reasons. An exacting analysis of scripture shows clearly, for Fudge, that God's punishment of the wicked is not everlasting. While the damned might undergo a finite period of torment, God ultimately brings them to an absolute end. And they deserve nothing less, given their sin and impenitence. At the end of time, the "wicked will become like weeds, straw, fruitless trees, all burned up with fire that is not resisted or thwarted. . . . They perish. They are destroyed."

Some readers may roll their eyes at this juncture. Isn't the attempt to arbitrate between traditional and annihilationist views a macabre counterpart to debates about angels dancing on the heads of pins? Well, I'd caution against being dismissive. This issue is important—because of the biblical witness, yes, but also because Christians *should* think seriously about salvation, judgment and life after death. Fudge's theological instincts are often on-target, too. While we mustn't ever lose sight of God's grace, we are obliged also to acknowledge the gravity of sin. We cannot suppose that God's love is permissive, that God overlooks or condones our myriad failings. Just as sin matters in human life, sin matters to God. It is an abrogation of the covenant. It is the very reason that God's saving grace passes through the horror of Calvary. And since the Bible posits some connection between sin and postmortem existence, theologians should take note. In so doing, one faces a truth that Calvin, Luther and others never let slip from view. No one deserves to be saved, given a refusal of right relationship with God. That God favors anyone bespeaks a love of unimaginable intensity and power.

Compromising such insights, however, is a terribly restrictive understanding of biblical inspiration. For Fudge to treat scripture as the source and norm for reflection is, of course, good and proper. But problems are bound to arise when the Bible is considered "without error in anything that it teaches . . . the only unquestionable, binding source of doctrine on this or any subject." Implicit here is a drift toward biblicism—a failure to distinguish between the divine event of revelation and the human witness of scripture; a tendency to make inspiration intrinsic to a human text, instead of acclaiming God's action

upon that text in the practices of reading, prayer, discussion and proclamation.

This error pushes Fudge into the unhappy position of attempting to systematize aspects of scripture that should not be systematized, given that they stand on the boundary of what is Christianly (and humanly) imaginable. A laudable preference for the “plain sense” of scripture often morphs into a weird kind of exegetical positivism; biblical passages that cry out for imaginative handling, even some degree of demythologization, are given undue attention. It’s unlikely that anyone can truly divine the meaning of phrases like “unquenchable fire” and “the gnashing of teeth,” but Fudge’s doctrine of inspiration is such that he is obliged to try his hand.

A broader problem: If one rejects the idea that God visits unending, conscious torment upon the reprobate, does positing their eventual extinction represent much in the way of theological progress? Haven’t we leapt from a torturous frying pan into an annihilative fire? Fudge, I fear, cannot shake the habit of viewing divine punishment in terms of postmortem, eschatological retribution. As such, he loses the opportunity to think about what God’s nonretributive, saving punishment might mean in the here-and-now. He writes movingly about God’s determination to bring about “a new heavens and a new earth” with “no more sin and only redeemed sinners,” but rather less assuredly about the kingdom in our midst. He edges toward a

different perspective—one that supposes God’s wrath is exhaustively articulated by way of the cross; one that acclaims the kingdom as it transforms human life right now; one that sees Christ bearing our sin in order to bear it away—but he cannot follow through.

This really is a lost opportunity. When the cross is considered not only as the “greatest revelation of God’s wrath” but the sum total of that wrath, actually and decisively outworked, what initially appears impossible—God bringing our faithless, stupid, miserable assault on God and each other to naught; Christ securing for us God’s unwavering favor and love—becomes thinkable. Salvation is no longer a distant blessing, reserved for the privileged few. Rather, the effects of Christ’s death appear as illimitable as the love that occasioned the incarnation. One can imagine how God’s just rejection of sin dovetails with God’s determination to distribute grace broadly, even promiscuously, in the past, present and future; one is nerved to approach debates about the scope of salvation with a combination of humility and good cheer. The former because we are wary of our failings and mindful of presumption, the latter because what God has done and is still doing obliges us to envisage the best possible future.

In certain respects, this combination of humility and cheer can be found in William Willimon’s *Who Will Be Saved?*—a less recent work (published in 2008), but one that supplies an important counterpoint to the other texts.

Willimon’s starting point is the incarnation as an event that defines God’s relationship with us and our relationship with God. Because of Jesus Christ, salvation cannot be spoken about in the subjunctive. In agreement with Barth, Willimon considers the incarnation reason to talk about salvation in the indicative—an “undeniable, ultimately irresistible fact” that confronts everyone.

Does this make universal salvation a “sure thing”? Not quite. Since knowledge of salvation doesn’t carry with it detailed information about the eschaton, Christians are obliged to exercise restraint, to beware the conceit that we are privy to God’s plans. And the very fact that salvation is a gracious, unanticipatable event forecloses the possibility of treating it as a birthright. A saving gift, by definition, may not be confused with an anthropological given. However, talk about “the reprobate”—that is, a discrete number of human beings who do not and will not receive the benefits won by Christ—now strikes a wrong note. Because God has acted decisively in Christ, it’s reasonable to hope for the best. It’s legitimate to suppose that God’s dealings with humankind will continue along the gracious lines that God has set down.

If Barth provides Willimon with a sense of salvation as an accomplished fact, John Wesley and Stanley Hauerwas shape Willimon’s account of the reception of grace. Usefully so—while some will find talk of “divine-human synergy” off-putting, Willimon is surely correct to join an acclamation of the objective fact of salvation with a discussion of our subjective response. Salvation is as much a vocational imperative as a justifying and sanctifying gift.

Our response to God mustn’t be overrated, of course. Human decision is not the pivot around which salvation turns;

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## On our anniversary

*For Andy*

The Quaker Meeting House in which we wed  
was shabby—its carpet faded Wedgewood blue,  
no festive flowers in a vase, or ribboned pews.  
But I loved the butter-yellow stucco walls,  
and the little graveyard at the back, ivy-grown,  
where only the tops of squat square stones shown  
grey above the vines. Beneath the eaves, we held  
for view our newly golden fingers, the charms  
through which we’d changed from two to one.

We knew a great thing had been done.  
We were to be each other’s rune and grail,  
trunk and totem, handkerchief and spoon.  
Forsaking sex with all others, refusing  
escape alone from trouble, we promised to cling  
to the human whom we’d named and kissed.  
And what a wonder that we did, and have, that years  
have proved us braver than we knew, and merry,  
too, love still searching out each other’s hands,  
as when, beneath the poplars’ summer green,  
we walked from vows to wedding cake and dancing,  
and cars drove in the street below the underpass,  
distracted, to their many destinations.

**Anya Silver**



we're participants in a process that God superintends from start to finish. Yet the subjective side of things should not be treated slightly or passingly, since there is "some degree of responsible exchange in the matter of our relationship with God." It follows, too, that while damnation is difficult to imagine, it cannot be ruled out. God will not bully us into the kingdom; God waits, patiently, for us to receive and embrace God's grace. And that allows the possibility—an absurd, baffling, but conceivable possibility—that some will forever resist God's gracious advance.

Does Willimon persuade? In many respects, yes. He avoids the pitfalls of populist neo-Arminianism, connects salvation with the incarnation and the cross and works with an appropriately nuanced doctrine of biblical inspiration. Even despite some troubling asides (if one admits to an "amateurish reading of the Qur'an," don't say anything about Islam), those looking for a compelling treatment of salvation will profit greatly from Willimon's book.

Again, however, there are serious problems. Most worrying is Willimon's decision to affiliate his perspective on salvation with an unnuanced diagnosis of the modern condition and an equally unnuanced account of the correct Christian response. Rather than supplying a fine-grained analysis of the social, cultural, philosophical and political moment in which we find ourselves, Willimon succumbs to an outmoded, oppositional style of reflection. It's rarely a case of the church as it exists in or, better, *for* the world; it's typically a

## Scripture does not offer a clear answer regarding the scope of salvation.

matter of church versus world. The script is dated, but that doesn't temper Willimon's enthusiasm—he reads the lines with gusto. As such, we're subjected to generalizations about the "nihilism" of the modern age, sweeping statements about human agency, occasional bursts of ecclesial militancy—and even a quick swipe at the Harry Potter novels.

No doubt, it is important to inhabit a late-modern context critically. Like Willimon, I worry about consumerism, sentimentality and jingoism. Like Willimon, I want an ecclesiology that protests, prophetically and creatively, those dimensions of our society that seem contrary to God's purposes. But a grace-based account of salvation that encourages a cheerful confidence in God's ways and works is best partnered with an equally upbeat account of creation, which segues into a cautious hopefulness about the diverse—and often imperceptible—ways that Christ and the Spirit enable human flourishing in the present. Put still more simply: a theological perspective centered on God's determination to save each and every one of us needn't polemicize against modernity (whatever *that* is).

The key issue here—and, yes, it's important to twist the knife a bit more—is theological consistency. Since Willimon struggles to understand that God's grace sets the terms for Christian thinking about everything that happens in time and space, his approach to creation, society and culture lacks the generosity of spirit that characterizes his treatment of salvation. Instead of balancing an appeal for ecclesial assuredness with an appreciative glance at certain aspects of late modernity that accord with Christian intuitions—say, a preference for democratic decision making, a willingness to reconsider gender and sexuality, and a refusal of uncritical loyalty toward putatively "traditional" values—one is left with the unhappy impression that Christians ought to shun the modern world lest they are undone by it. I sometimes felt, in fact, that Willimon's rejection of double predestination came back to haunt him, albeit with a shift from the simplistic binary of reprobate/saved to the simplistic binary of church/world. His readers therefore face an unhappy choice: do they escape populist neo-Arminianism and annihilationism, only to find themselves saddled with a new form of Manichaeism?

Yet Willimon is on the right track. This account of "hopeful universalism"—something other than a works-based populist neo-Arminianism or a capricious doctrine of double predestination; something short of making universal salvation a dogmatic no-brainer—is important and compelling. Yet it still needs, I think, more theological oomph. To supply this, it's useful to reflect on why hopeful universalism might be preferred to less expansive construals of salvation. (And at this point, I take leave of Willimon—what follows are my own views).

Straightaway one must acknowledge that scripture does not provide a clear answer to queries about the scope of salvation. In fact, the Bible admits of diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations. An appeal to Colossians 1:19 ("though him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things") can be set against an appeal to Romans 9:15 ("I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy"; see also Exodus 33:19). An appeal to Romans 5:18 ("just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all") can be countered by an appeal to John 6:44 ("No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me").

Might a summary of the general drift of the scriptural witness resolve the issue? Not really. There's no consensus about this drift; it's even questionable as to whether one can talk about drift in the singular. Best to be honest: neither exegetical studies nor broad appeals to biblical theology will ever settle debates about the scope of salvation.

A better starting point for reflection, then: given that God's principal purpose is to disburse saving love to humankind, and given that God has the means to make good on God's purpose, it is fitting to hope for the best. The neo-Arminian mistake is to suppose that God's desire for our salvation is trumped by our sinful resistance to God—an overestimation of human potency and an underestimation of God's sovereignty. The Calvinist mistake is to suppose that God permits and effects the eternal damnation of some—a claim hard to square with a



**Lead paint poisoning affects  
over one million children today.**

Learning disabilities, hearing loss, speech delays, violent behavior and, in the worst cases, seizures and even death: these are just some of the effects lead paint poisoning has on young children. If your home was built before 1978, lead paint on your walls, doors, windows and sills may be dangerous. And it's not just large paint chips that can cause damage. In fact, three granules of lead dust are enough to poison your child. Let's make all kids lead-free kids. To learn more about the simple steps you can take to safeguard your family, log on to **LEADFREEKIDS.org** or call **800-424-LEAD**.





belief in God's love. The hopeful universalist alternative envisages a loving God getting what God wants: the salvation of humankind. It holds fast to God's love *and* God's sovereignty.

But still we haven't said enough. While a disproportionate emphasis on human agency has been checked and a punitive construal of divine justice exchanged for an emphasis on love and grace, the painful fact of sin must still be addressed. That is to say, if human beings reject God and harm one another, with the result that God and human beings exist in a condition of estrangement, a mere assertion of divine love doesn't provide sufficient support for an affirmation of hopeful universalism. What's needed, in addition, is an account of God's righteous contestation of sin—a contestation of such magnitude that the condition of estrangement no longer obtains. Absent such an account, Christian theology risks an abbreviated view of God and an account of salvation that yields only warm platitudes. With such an account in hand, however, salvation can be acclaimed an unmerited gift, offered despite our continuing fall into wickedness.

## It's not theological overreach to hope that salvation will come to all.

So let's nuance our starting point—an account of God's love and sovereignty—with the category of election. Let's then add another step of reasoning.

Following the later Barth, I favor an account of God's love for humankind that identifies Jesus Christ as the “electing God” and “elected human.” These terms, I hasten to add, aren't a tip of the hat to ardent Calvinists. Talk of election helps to connect the doctrines of God, Christ and salvation. It's a way of saying, specifically, that God's loving advance toward us, realized in Christ, has ramifications for human being as such. The incarnation makes a difference to who we are. It renders us people who bear the image of “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation” (Col. 1:15); it marks us as those whom God “chose . . . in Christ before the foundation of the world [and] destined for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:4–5).

Christ, on this reckoning, isn't merely a focus for Christian thought and action (although he is certainly that). Christ is the basis for a soteriology that delights in the fact that none of us are the sum total of our awkward, sinful and frequently disappointing lives. Through Christ, God has bound Godself to us, and us to God, in the most radical way imaginable. And this binding is not occasional or temporary. It cuts to the heart of who we are, while speaking volumes about the person that God is and the actions that God undertakes. Precisely because the scope of the Son's intercession is as broad as the humanity that he assumes, precisely because Jesus is “exalted at the right hand of the Father” (Acts 2:33, cf. Acts 7:55–6 and Mark 16:19), there is good reason to suppose that God's saving work has no

limits. It's not theological overreach to hope that salvation will come to all. Such hope follows directly from an awareness of God's love and power, articulated by Christ and distributed, mysteriously, by Christ's Spirit.

The next step is to say plainly that Christ's engagement with sin—an engagement that encompasses Christ's life, death and resurrection—is such that sin has no future. I don't want to suggest here that sin is no longer part of human life. It clearly is, and the world in which we live often shows signs of getting worse, not better. My point is this: in light of Christ's person and work, sin no longer sets the terms for our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. On the cross, specifically, Christ draws the full weight of human sinfulness—past, present and future—upon himself, rendering himself the one in whom all sin is overcome.

There really *is* a “consuming fire,” then, as Edward Fudge supposes. But this fire doesn't await sinners in the future. This fire—the fire of God's holy love—concentrates itself in Jesus' own suffering and death. And because Christ takes to heart the entire shocking history of our sin, sin is wholly burned up, wholly *finished*, when Christ breathes his last. Is this not the meaning of Jesus' cry of dereliction? Doesn't this cry show that God has accepted Christ's thoroughgoing identification with sinners and that God's contestation of sin has run its course? And with the fire of God's holy love burned out, doesn't the resurrection show God relating to God's children in a new way?

Hopeful universalism, on this reckoning, does not require the Christian to downplay the past, present and future fact of wrongdoing. It requires only that the Christian acknowledge the nearly unimaginable price that Christ paid for our salvation: *being* the sin that God condemns and rejects, so that those who live “in him” (that is, all of us) might receive the blessings of God's favor.

A host of auxiliary issues (the Holy Spirit, the church, eschatology) must still be addressed, of course. However, I've gestured here toward the legitimacy of hopeful universalism. Christians need not resort to warmhearted banalities when affirming “all shall be well”; it's possible to supply a decent response to those who suppose that salvation has fixed limits.

A “decent response”? Precisely that—a response both reasonable and graciously offered. If Rob Bell's *Love Wins* tells us anything, it's that the Augustinian-Calvinist consensus on limited salvation is breaking down and that populist neo-Arminianism is losing its luster. Hopeful universalists therefore have an opportunity to frame new discussions about the scope of salvation. And we should do so, too, without lapsing into talk of orthodoxy, heterodoxy and heresy—categories so degraded by rancorous argument and power plays as to be next to worthless. What's needed for profitable discussion is something different: a belief in the open-ended task of exegesis, a light theological touch, a dose of good humor and a clear sense of the impossibility of closure. If hopeful universalists can achieve that—well, regardless of the extent of salvation, we'll at least be doing something to honor a love that, we hope, wins.



## Breaking the cycle of payday loans

# Lending with grace

by Jesse James DeConto

**OFTEN WHEN SOMETHING** goes wrong—when a child gets sick or a car breaks down—people need extra money fast. As former Pittsburgh cop Tony Wiles knows, people who need money fast are vulnerable.

“I grew up in the inner city, so I’ve seen it all,” he said. “Loan sharks, pawnshops and payday loan companies on every corner.”

Wiles hadn’t considered doing anything about the issue until Rock Dillaman, his pastor at Allegheny Center Alliance Church, preached a sermon on justice. The pastor planted a seed that led Wiles to develop a low-cost payday lender called Grace Period.

Grace Period is an alternative to the typical payday advance or check cashing service, which charges a flat fee for a small loan that’s due when a customer receives his or her next paycheck. For example, a borrower of \$300 might need to repay \$345 at the end of two weeks.

If the financial transaction ended there, these payday lenders

## “Payday lending is a modern form of usury.”

would not have earned the label “predator.” But many clients’ next paychecks have to go for rent and utilities, so they can’t pay the loan back when it’s due, and the lenders exact fees at a rate equivalent to an annual rate of 300 to 800 percent.

“The average loan gets rolled seven times before it gets paid back,” said Dan Krebs, CEO of Grace Period and a former auto dealer who teamed up with Wiles four years ago.

In a two-year study surveying about 11,000 payday borrowers, the Center for Responsible Lending found that the average borrower was in debt for 372 days. Nearly half of the borrowers defaulted, and the typical \$300 loan ballooned to \$466 before it was repaid.

Krebs and Wiles decided to offer an alternative to this cycle. They began talks with Pittsburgh Central Federal Credit Union about a partnership.

“No mainstream organization is helping [the borrowers],” said Krebs. “The idea was for the church to create a credit union. The mission was to bank the unbanked.”

Grace Period offers free loans for clients who repay them within 13 days, and it requires a long-term savings program so clients can meet their emergency needs in the future.

“We have people who are actually saving money for the first time in their lives,” said Wiles, who is Grace Period’s board president. “They look at these programs as a savior.”

**L**isa Dukes-Garner, a mother of four, knows how suddenly financial crisis can arrive. In fall 2008, her husband died of a heart attack. “Duane always took care of every little thing about my vehicle,” she said. “When I lost Duane, I started having all these issues with my car.”

Dukes-Garner needed money to rent a car while hers was in the shop so that she could get her youngest son to day care and herself to work. She didn’t know where to turn.

“I’ve never had to ask anybody for anything. People always came to me asking me for something,” she says. “Where was I going to get the money?”

A friend told her about Grace Period. She was able to borrow money for car repairs, rent, groceries and her teenage son’s braces.

Her family had been getting by on her salary as a community AIDS educator and her husband’s salary as a substance-abuse counselor. But now, with household income cut in half, Dukes-Garner worries about every financial detail, including how much spending money to send her son in college. In between paychecks, she sometimes visits food pantries.

“At times I’m really, really low on food,” she says. “I’m not a very prideful person to where I won’t access secondhand stores. I never realized how hard it is, especially when it’s just you trying to take care of everything.”

Because Grace Period automatically withdraws \$100 from her \$900 in take-home pay every two weeks, Dukes-Garner recently paid off all her loans and saved enough so that her next loan will come out of her own account. She’s learned to live on the remaining \$400 a week, so her Grace Period emergency fund was an unexpected blessing.

“I thought that everything that came out of my account was just paying for what I had borrowed,” she said. “You mean I have money sitting there that I didn’t even know was there? That is a beautiful thing. The money that they do take every month is saved for me.”

Credit unions were formed with the goal of offering savings and loan programs to low-income families. Grace Period is not the first faith-based credit union to respond to payday lending. In 1999, Faith Community Credit Union in Cleveland began

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*Jesse James DeConto is a writer in Durham, North Carolina.*



offering a “grace loan” for borrowers who might otherwise use a payday lender. The emergency loan has lower fees and interest rates and a \$500 monthly credit limit. It requires proof of employment and \$10 a month in savings. Other faith-based agencies have partnered with local credit unions to offer substitute payday loans. Mission: St. Louis created the Change for Good lending program with Choices Federal Credit Union. The Virginia United Methodist Credit Union offers small short-term loans through its Jubilee Assistance Fund.

“It’s really valuable to have a model of what Christian business can look like,” said Rachel Anderson, faith-based program director at the Center for Responsible Lending.

Grace Period doesn’t make direct loans; it serves as a guarantor, promising to repay Pittsburgh Central Federal Credit Union if a borrower can’t. The agency also funnels the monthly electronic transfers into customers’ credit-union accounts and lends out members’ money to other members in a cooperative format. The Alliance Church brought \$100,000 of its own money to Grace Period, as well as dozens of new credit union customers with another \$850,000 in assets that help offset the costs of the loans to penniless borrowers.

“The loans themselves barely pay for the person who’s processing them,” says Krebs. “Loans don’t make money.”

The initial payday loans are made at 18 percent interest, with \$12-a-week dues paid if the loans are not repaid within two weeks; the rate drops below 6 percent once the original credit union loan is paid off and clients start borrowing from other Grace Period cooperative members. Those fees support seven employees. Because the loans are so small, Grace Period sees no profit. Once Grace Period starts lending borrowers money from their individual accounts, they can earn that money back at \$4 a week—much like getting interest on a bank account.

The founders of Grace Period aim to show that the model is sustainable. “Unless it’s self-supporting, nobody’s going to duplicate it,” said Krebs.

Grace Period presented its model at the past two conferences of the Christian Community Development Association, and the agency is encouraging alternative payday lending, which is taking root across the country. The founders of Just Money Advisors, a nonprofit financial planner with clients in 25 states, are working to open another Grace Period in Louisville, Kentucky. The Louisville group plans to team up with the LouChem Federal Credit Union to open its first storefront in 2012 and half a dozen more locations in the coming years.

The key to success is requiring a yearlong commitment to direct deposit savings if a customer doesn’t pay off the initial debt within the first two weeks. The direct deposit requirement not only forces people to save but also shields Grace Period from having to handle cash in crime-ridden neighborhoods where payday lenders proliferate.

“That part is genius,” said Just Money executive Andy Loving, a Baptist minister turned socially responsible investment adviser. “We know that money habits die hard. To think that you’re going to be able to give people a better choice and they’re going to stop digging a hole for themselves is just not realistic. After eight or nine months of this, a light begins to go on.”

“Here in Louisville, there are more payday loan stores than



there are McDonalds, Starbucks and KFCs combined,” Loving said. “The church is always going to have to be in that place of helping folks in emergencies, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But when we have the capability and the capacity of moving past that, we should be doing it. This is not rocket science.”

**D**illaman, the pastor at Allegheny Center Alliance Church, came to Allegheny Center in the 1980s, when most white churches were moving out of Northside. He decided to move into the neighborhood and convinced the congregation to stay. At the time, the 400-member congregation had only one African-American member, while the neighborhood was 60 percent black; after decades of growth the church now has about 1,000 black members.

Alliance has initiated other community development efforts: Urban Impact offers nighttime and weekend youth activities, like tutoring, sports and the arts; Bistro to Go employs 30 people in the neighborhood center. The church spent \$200,000 to buy a bar that was attracting crime to the neighborhood, and it plans to redevelop the site. Two physicians at the church helped found the Northside Christian Health Center for low-cost medical care.

“We made a commitment to stay here and embrace a more holistic and, I think, a more biblically faithful approach to ministry,” says Dillaman.

The church also gives about \$200,000 a year in direct financial assistance to neighbors in need. CRL’s Anderson said churches’ efforts can help wean people off payday lenders, but the situation also calls for political action to cap interest rates. Payday lending is thriving in states where the industry has

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been able to weaken anti-usury laws. Most states allow fees of 10 to 20 percent over a two- to four-week loan period, which can quadruple principal loan amounts over a year's time. Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Maine, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont and Wisconsin currently have no limits on payday loan fees. Opponents have fought back and succeeded in prohibiting triple-digit interest rates in 17 states, including Montana, where a voters' referendum recently set a 36 percent interest rate cap after the Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United Church of Christ organized in support of the cap.

Anderson also cited the Industrial Areas Foundation's 10 Percent Is Enough campaign, which has been lobbying for a cap on the federal credit card rate (see "The people's interest," *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*, January 12, 2010). Similar movements are under way in Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, New Hampshire and Alabama.

"It's knit into the teaching of many faiths that using a loan to exploit someone is not just abusive but immoral. Payday lending is a modern-day form of usury," Anderson says. "We need good regulations to work hand-in-hand with good business."

Loving insists that churches and ecumenical service agencies must add alternative payday loans to their ministries. The mainstream cash-advance industry generates tens of billions of dollars in revenue each year on the backs of desperate people, and right now there are few alternatives.

"We're not putting them out of business any time soon," Loving noted.

**F**our years into Grace Period's existence, its backers in the Alliance congregation have increased their assets at the credit union to more than \$1 million—and that's not counting 3,000 Grace Period borrowers who have begun to save. The credit union loaned \$1.5 million to Grace Period clients in 2010, and more than \$11,000 a month comes from customers' own savings accounts.

"The whole idea is to get people to the point where they're using their own money," said Krebs. "Things happen. It's not luck. My car breaks too. Everybody's car breaks. You've got to have a plan."

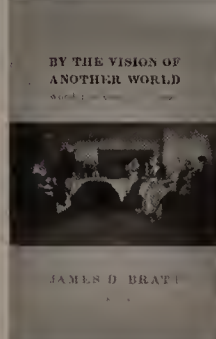
Realistically, said Krebs, Grace Period for most clients simply offers a cheaper loan than they might get at a place like Advance America. Encouraging personal financial reform is a much greater chal-

lenge. In fact, Grace Period has found that only about 3 percent of clients actually reform their financial habits. Others continue to pay giant interest rates for rent-to-own furniture or huge fees for early refunds offered through tax preparation franchises.

"I give everybody an opportunity to benefit completely, and whether they choose to do it, I can't control," said Krebs. "Sometimes you get somebody who took this little thing and applied it to more parts of their lives." But even with its limited impact, Grace Period is keeping customers out of the cycle of predatory lending. Said Krebs: "We're keeping people from going to places that are really going to take advantage of them."

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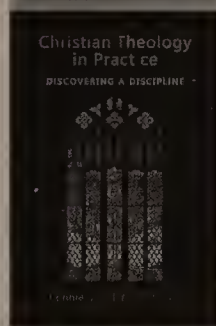
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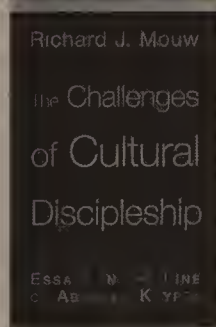
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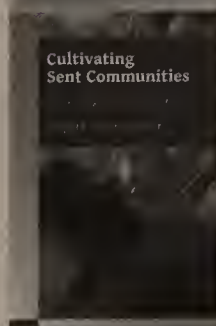
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What is pastoral ministry like these days, and how is it being shaped in new ways? The CENTURY talked to pastors about the challenges and surprises of their early years in ministry. This interview is the seventh in a series.

# MINISTRY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

## A foundation for relationships

Joyce Shin  
Chicago, Illinois

*Joyce Shin attended the University of Chicago Divinity School. She is associate pastor for congregational life at Fourth Presbyterian Church, a large congregation in downtown Chicago. Along with promoting fellowship within the congregation, her duties include preaching, pastoral care, developing lay leadership and fostering interfaith understanding and relations.*

### What excites you most about ministry these days?

The possibility that it can serve as a resource for the spiritual health of interfaith marriages and families. More than at any other time in history, people raised in different religious traditions are building intimate relationships with each other. The problem is that too often religion is thought of as an impediment to building these relationships. My hope is that churches, synagogues and mosques can be resources for people as they negotiate and integrate all their deepest commitments, including their most significant relationships.

These relationships require trust and loyalty. Religion has at its core a concern for trust and loyalty—a concern for faith. So rather than being an impediment to these new relationships, religion can, I think, offer the necessary resources for creating and sustaining them.

**In your experience, what does supporting interfaith families look like in practice?**



COURTESY FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CHICAGO

Over the past year, I've been collaborating with a rabbi from a neighboring congregation to host a series of monthly dialogues for interfaith families and couples. We discuss practical topics: talking to children about God, planning a wedding, circumcision and baptism. We have found that these dialogues attract interfaith couples who are about to be married, interfaith couples with young children, and grandparents whose grandchildren are being raised in interfaith homes.

The rabbi and I take different approaches to some of the issues, but we do not impose our own approaches on the participants. We try to set an example of respectful and appreciative dialogue, and we try to create a safe arena for honest inquiry and heartfelt exchange.

### What has been the hardest part of parish ministry?

The same as perhaps it has always been: bringing good news, healing news, to those who are hurting—whether their pain is physical, psychological, spiritual, economic or social. This is the hardest part of our work, and yet it is what calls us each day to renew our efforts.

### Why is this the hardest thing?

In any painful situation that's out of your control—physical pain, news of cancer, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job—a sense of helplessness exists. We cannot fix people's



problems, and this is hard to accept. So the challenge is to accompany people with the care of listening, praying and modeling a confidence in God's love and presence in their lives. It can be emotionally exhausting. But it is through the depth of these experiences that we can begin to comprehend and be grateful for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Also, the experience of suffering always puts faith to the test. Can we speak, even preach, our convictions about God to someone who is suffering—without causing them more pain and suffering? It's only when we can do this that we can honestly say there is some good news in our theology.

### **What has been most surprising about ministry?**

The energy with which laypeople offer their time, talent and treasure. Fourth Church's congregants are deeply engaged in the life of the city and beyond, and they bring so much to this church: their awareness of people's needs, their affiliations with other organizations, their ideas for new initiatives, lots of their time. This has been a daily source of inspiration to me, and it demands a great deal of responsiveness—and responsibility—from ministers.

That has been the most surprising and inspiring thing about parish ministry. None of my teachers in divinity school told me to expect it.

### **On the basis of your ministry experience so far, what would you want to change about your seminary education, or what would you want to add to it?**

Once ministry begins, multitasking ramps up. That's when it becomes very clear what a privilege it was to study full-time. As

## **“Faith is about commitments of loyalty and trust.”**

a minister, one's routine opportunity to engage in study consists largely of the discipline of preparing a sermon.

My most common critique of the sermons I hear is that they don't deeply engage and grapple with the biblical text. I think ministry students need to be equipped with the knowledge of how to make the best use of scholarship for this task. So I think I would have benefited from taking more Bible courses as a student.

### **Would it have been possible for you to choose to do this, or would it have required a revision to the curriculum?**

I could have taken more courses in biblical studies. But it's only in hindsight that I realize I should have done so.

### **What's your process of sermon preparation? What resources do you find helpful?**

I read the lectionary texts and select one or more biblical passages to focus on. Then I read and take notes on what biblical commentaries teach me about the text—as many commentaries as I can get my hands on. After this, I ask myself what the meaning of the text is and how it sheds light on our life experiences and on current issues. These questions lead me

to read other things—a variety of genres and historical, interdisciplinary, cultural and generational perspectives. The need to prepare a sermon gives me a great excuse to read widely.

### **What are your go-to commentaries?**

I find myself turning to *Interpretation*, the New Testament Library, Hermeneia, Word Biblical Commentaries, Sacra Pagina and the *Anchor Bible*. I'm sure there are others that I would find helpful, too.

### **Who has shaped your understanding of ministry?**

The theologian who has most shaped my approach is H. Richard Niebuhr. One of my responsibilities is to cultivate fellowship in the congregation. At a large church, this can be challenging. I take seriously Niebuhr's insight that faith is inherently social: it consists of our commitments of loyalty and trust. We often inherit our faith from the people we trust most in life, and our faith can be enlarged when we take on the causes to which our closest and most trusted friends are loyal.

Niebuhr's theory gets concrete quite easily. Whenever someone dear to me cares deeply about a cause, I open my mind and heart to it out of a sense of loyalty to that person. It is through interpersonal relationships that our imaginations and compassion expand.

My approach to ministry has also been shaped by the philosopher John Dewey, who underscores the necessity of engaging one's environment in order to have an experience that is truly transformative. Ministry can be transformative only if we are constantly engaging the world around us. In interfaith work, mission, evangelism—in every aspect of ministry—we will never lose our vitality and dynamism as long as we continue to engage, both locally and globally.

I think about Dewey's insights as I become more acquainted with Islamic and Jewish congregations in our neighborhood and continue to collaborate with them.

### **What does being a leader mean? Has your understanding evolved?**

There are so many books written on leadership and the skills it requires. Certainly, being a leader entails having a big-picture vision for an institution, as well as the talent to articulate that vision and engage others in the work of living into it. Leadership also means knowing the details and dynamics at work in the life of the institution that one is leading.

Sometimes leadership is conceived of primarily as something that is goal-oriented and that requires execution of certain skills. Goals and skills are no doubt necessary. But it seems to me that in ministry, leadership is at its heart profoundly relational. Being a leader is a relationship of receiving the trust of others and being responsible to them.

The trust that a congregation gives you when it calls you to be its pastor—even if you are straight out of seminary—feels weighty and is precious. Pastors bear a lot of responsibility, and this sense of responsibility is what I am most keenly aware of in my daily interactions with congregants, in my prepara-





tion of sermons, in my administration of programs, in my pastoral care calls.

### **What would you be if you weren't a minister?**

Perhaps I would teach theological ethics at a college or religion at a private high school; I think it is important to keep religion and ethics active in the minds of young people. I might be an educator committed to citywide school reform. I might be an actress who steps deeply into diverse characters—I have always been fascinated by the power and art of empathy.

### **What does your denominational affiliation mean to you?**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is meaningful to me mostly for historical reasons. I am profoundly grateful for the rigorous theological and ethical writings of John Calvin and for the Reformed worldview that Presbyterians have inherited.

### **What does it mean to your parishioners?**

Congregants in our church aren't necessarily knowledgeable about PCUSA polity or about current denominational dynamics and issues. But I do think many of them are in touch with the values of the Reformed tradition.

### **How have pastors and others with more experience been helpful to you?**

I consider myself extremely fortunate to serve on a staff

with a number of pastors, because I learn different things from each of them. From those who are more experienced in ministry, I have learned from observation as well as from their mentoring. By observing them I have learned when to speak and when not to speak and how to pace myself, as well as the value of taking the long view.

My more experienced colleagues have also provided me with good counsel when I have sought it. Fortunately, no one has offered unsolicited advice, which speaks to their collegial spirit and their abiding trust that we all learn important things in time. While some people think that we learn by trial and error, I like to avoid as much error as possible by observing those whom I respect and asking them for counsel.

### **Have you also learned from mistakes you've made?**

Oh yes. I have learned from opportunities missed, from speaking too soon, from speaking instead of listening, from speaking in one way instead of another way. One advantage of working with other pastors on staff is that we don't let each other make really grave mistakes. The mistakes we make usually have to do with the art of ministry. As in many of the arts, you become more skilled with practice and experience.

I also simply enjoy my colleagues' company. We laugh a lot when we are together.

### **Do you also maintain regular contact with people in solo pastorates?**

I do. Their experience of ministry is quite different from mine. I have deep respect for them, especially for the sense of responsibility they carry. It's up to them to shepherd their congregations.

### **What developments would you like to see in your congregation's mission or in the wider church's?**

I would like to see the congregation I serve become increasingly multi-racial. This is my dream for the wider church as well.

### **As for racial diversity in the wider church, are you thinking of individual congregations, the overall membership or both?**

I am thinking about individual congregations; I am interested in the actual interactions between people of different races. The give and take, the humor, the variety of perspectives, the empathy—all of these experiences would enrich our communal life, and it would move us toward true integrity as the church. I think it would be pleasing to God.

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by Thomas G. Long

## Future fatigue

ONCE UPON A TIME, ministry involved preaching, counseling, leading worship and guiding congregations in mission. All were demanding tasks, to be sure, but they were nothing compared to what is expected of pastors today—predicting the future. Clergy conferences now trumpet words like *emergent*, *postmodern*, *next* and *futuring*, a vocabulary born out of apprehension that the church is crumbling around us and the future is a giant meteor hurtling toward our doomed planet. A new generation of prophets—mostly young, mostly technologically savvy—paint apocalyptic scenarios of the coming wrath followed by visions of a wireless new Jerusalem rising from the ruins. “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” wrote Santayana, but today’s wisdom runs in the other direction. Those who cannot anticipate the future are condemned to be crushed by it.

We who work in seminaries are no exceptions. Until recently, about the only forecasting required of me was to announce what courses I planned to teach during the next term and to participate in the periodic convulsion episodes known as “curricular reform.” But now we are warned that the master of divinity degree (the bread and butter of many theological schools) is rapidly losing traction, the idea of students coming to campus to spend several years reading theology is quaint and unrealistic, and seminaries are beginning to look like Studebaker dealerships.

So both clergy and professors are pressed to be soothsayers. We sit around conference tables gazing anxiously into the future, and what we think we see is as unsettling as it is increasingly clear. The future church (and the future seminary) will be less reliant upon tenured professionals and will be more flexible, increasingly free from bricks and mortar, accessible online, interactive, more focused on experience than on belief and doctrine, and firmly embedded in the digital, fluid, interfaith, multicultural and unbounded realities of the new global context.

Or will it? The problem with trying to fathom the future, as former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld once clumsily observed, is that there are not only “known knowns” and “known unknowns,” but also “unknown unknowns.” Rumsfeld omitted perhaps the most perilous ingredient of all: “presumed knowns,” things we think we know but do not.

The 1939 New York World’s Fair was dubbed “the world of tomorrow,” and millions of visitors sported buttons proclaiming, “I Have Seen the Future!” The fair promised to rocket people out of the gloom of the Depression into the wonders of 1960, but what visitors actually saw were things like Tomorrow

Town, a neighborhood that looked like suburban Levittown, a futuristic “smell-o-vision” movie theater that never materialized, and a Westinghouse-sponsored dishwashing contest between Mrs. Drudge, with dishpan hands, and Mrs. Modern, who sported a cocktail dress and effortlessly loaded dishes into a spiffy electric dishwasher.

The most popular attraction was General Motors’ Futurama, a ride that ferried visitors over a scale model of a gleaming future city. Not surprisingly, GM envisioned a slumless metropolis built around the automobile, with lovely gossamer suspension bridges and congestion-free superhighways. E. L. Doctorow, who was nine when he visited Futurama, got the point. “General Motors is telling us what they expect from us: we must build them the highways so they can sell us the cars.”

In retrospect, the world of tomorrow was a vision mostly cantilevered off of the present and whipped to a froth through wishful thinking. Overwhelmed by unknown unknowns and sometimes led astray by presumed knowns, the 1939 Fair was an often naive hymn to American progress and consumerism. The designers can be forgiven for not foreseeing that the gleaming towers of Futurama would one day be brought down by terrorism, or that the grandchildren of the fairgoers would have to rescue General Motors off the scrap heap, or that little girls like Gloria Steinem, who was five in 1939, would grow up to have a different take on Mrs. Drudge and Mrs. Modern. But how could they, in their blue-sky optimism, have missed an already bellicose Third Reich and the global conflict that was only months away?

This does not mean that predicting the future is either impossible or undesirable. Psychologist Rollo May said that neurotics and artists, who consciously live out emerging trends that the rest of us keep in our unconscious, are particularly good at predicting the future. (Think Steve Jobs.) But people of faith should probe the future with humility, prayer and, as befits Easter people, an openness to being completely and absolutely surprised.

A systematic theologian I know once gave the closing address at a church futuring conference in the early 1970s, when Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* was all the rage. Following papers by culture critics, sociologists and others who were making confident prognostications, this theologian said, in essence, “I am a theologian. I have no idea what the future holds. I know only that it will be held in the hands of God.” Years later he came across the conference papers. After rereading them, he said, “You know, I was the only one who was right!”

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Thomas G. Long teaches at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology.



# IN Review

## Apocalyptic visions

by J. Nelson Kraybill

**D**iscussion of Gnosticism at a recent gathering of local clergy generated a comment from one pastor that perhaps Christian scriptures should be kept in a loose-leaf binder so we can add and remove documents at will. How unfortunate that our Bibles come on gilt-edged paper securely bound between leather covers. Truth should not be so defined and confined!

Elaine Pagels's *Revelations* could be a resource for a project to remove canonical boundaries. This readable and tendentious book repeats a formula that has become a winner in an era of spiritual self-empowerment: highlight parts of the canonical New Testament or early church orthodoxy that are most likely to ruffle modern progressive feathers and contrast those with selections of Gnostic writings that are most likely to resonate with contemporary preferences. In this contest early church leaders and canonical scriptures come across as patriarchal, authoritarian and vindictive in contrast to the alleged inclusivity, generosity and feminism of Gnosticism.

The astonishing cache of ancient writings discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945 provides most of the Gnostic texts Pagels cites. These spiritual books display the diversity of theologies and spiritual writings that swirled around the Mediterranean world in the early centuries of the Common Era. Loose-leaf binders had not yet been invented, but they are in effect what the church had; the canon of authoritative Christian documents had not yet stabilized. Churches scattered across and beyond the Roman Empire had not yet formed consensus on how to express central doctrines such as the Trinity. Who or what would serve as theological authority for doctrinal dis-

cernment? Only apostolic eyewitnesses to the Christ event? Could there be later revelations?

Pagels begins her treatment of these questions with a summary of scholarly consensus about the last book of the canonical New Testament. She explains that John of Patmos, working within an established literary tradition of apocalyptic symbolism, wrote a scathing anti-imperial tract that accuses the Roman government of colluding with Satan. The four horsemen of John's apocalypse represent scourges inflicted by empire, and John, a devout messianic Jew, considered the Roman emperor cult to be blasphemous. The war, persecution and hubris that Nero brought to the ancient world also play into the book of Revelation. The destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 explains much of the high-voltage outrage in John's work. John's beast symbolism has roots both in the Hebrew scriptures and in Babylonian creation mythology.

After putting John of Patmos into historical and literary context, Pagels turns to the heart of her discussion: the struggle that ensued as the early church sought unity on doctrine and canon in the face of multiple revelations. Modern readers might assume that the last book of the New Testament was the only apocalypse circulating in the early church. Pagels shows otherwise. Nag Hammadi books illustrate the fecundity of revelations in the early Christian centuries, among them the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Revelation to Peter*, the *Fourth Book of Ezra* and the *Secret Revelation of John*. The latter posits that the transcendent male God can be known through a lesser form of divine being, "often characterized by feminine form," with the name Protенnoia, which can be translated as

### Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation

By Elaine Pagels  
Penguin, 256 pp., \$27.95

primordial consciousness or Mother or even Holy Spirit.

These Gnostic books reflect ongoing revelation and experiential knowledge of God, in contrast to what Pagels depicts as the narrow-mindedness of authoritarian male leaders such as Tertullian, Irenaeus, Athanasius and Eusebius—men who closed the canon, formulated creeds and created hierarchy. Gnostics were free-thinking individualists unencumbered by accountability to community or external authority. Their theology is all over the map, but general patterns emerge: No kingdom of God is coming because that is only a metaphor for individual enlightenment. Jesus is not Lord or Master but simply a kind of guru who helps people find the good and divine within themselves. There is no sin from which mortals need salvation, only ignorance that the Gnostics can dispel.

One ancient Gnostic text, the *Gospel of Truth*, declares that persons with spiritual eyes opened realize that "they themselves are truth . . . and the Father is within them." The author of the book *Allogenes* exults that when he came to see "the good that was in me, I became divine." The *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* proclaims: "The Son of Man is within you; follow him!" The *Teachings of*

J. Nelson Kraybill is president emeritus of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and author of *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (*Brazos*).





*Silvanus* counsels readers to “knock upon yourself as upon a door. . . . Open the door for yourself.” Nag Hammadi scrolls abound with such self-referential notions.

Brooding bishops squelched this independent thinking, Pagels declares. Then the entire weight of the church came down upon it after Constantine’s conversion. The canonical book of Revelation sometimes provided ammunition for traditionalists who associated Gnostics and other “heretics” with the beast seen by John of Patmos. John’s apocalypse, Pagels implies, is vindictive in that it “conjures cosmic war” with “good fighting evil” and hurls nasty epithets such as “cowards, the faithless, abominable, filthy . . . liars” at opponents.

The vision of John of Patmos indeed has been exploited over the centuries by wackos and bigots, and there are portions that make me cringe. But what if we reversed Pagels’s formula and compared the best of Revelation with the worst of Gnostic literature? What if we contrasted the Revelation 7 vision of people “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” worshiping God, with the chauvinistic statement attributed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas*, that “every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven”? How does the orthodox concept of God-with-us in suffering stand up to the Gnostic idea in the *Revelation to Peter* that the one crucified on Golgotha was simply a stand-in and a “home of demons” while the real Savior was laughing nearby?

I am grateful that early Christian leaders struggled over canon, creed and authority to steer the church away from a lot of esoteric rubbish, and I do not share Pagels’s idealization of the ancient Gnostics. But her new book is a worthy read as a window into the spiritual and political complexity of the first centuries of the Christian era. It is fascinating, for example, to see how early monastics collected and preserved diverse writings, including works of pagan philosophy and scrolls such as those found at Nag Hammadi.

There were many revelations in the early church, and there are eloquent parts of the Nag Hammadi library that may contain otherwise lost sayings of Jesus. Most of the Gnostic texts, however, issue from centuries after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather than show-

ing us something authentic about Jesus or the apostles, they show us the psychological and theological imagination of a Jewish messianic movement cross-fertilizing with the pagan Hellenistic world.

This book would be stronger if it did not include factual errors in its treatment of canonical biblical texts. In discussing the first verses of Ezekiel—dated to 593 BCE—Pagels says, “by that time Babylonian soldiers had demolished the Jerusalem temple.” The temple actually fell seven years *after* the prophecy in question—so that verse has a dramatically different context. Pagels refers to Paul’s Damascus Road experience as happening decades after Jesus died, when all evidence points to it having taken place within two or three years of Jesus’ ministry. She states that Paul spent “three difficult years in Asia Minor and Greece” after his conversion when in fact he spent that time in Arabia. Such sloppiness does not change her overall argument, but it creates the unfortunate and mistaken impression that she is not closely familiar with the canonical texts.

In her 1979 best seller *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels offered insight that should inform reading of her current book:

Had Christianity remained multiform, it might well have disappeared from history. . . . I believe that we owe the survival of Christian tradition to the organizational and theological structure that the emerging church developed.

I agree. Pagels’s statement of three decades ago prompts a question: does the orthodoxy that was emerging in the early church—despite distorting sins such as patriarchy and violence—still deserve to be seen as God’s gift? Yes, it does, even if the Spirit today leads us to some correctives. Orthodox Christians of the first centuries focused on finding consensus, fostering community and strengthening the church; Gnostics were on an individualistic trajectory that atomized the Christian movement and made it into a precursor of psychotherapy. In our increasingly fragmented modern church, we need intellectually rigorous orthodoxy a whole lot more than we need romanticized rehabilitation of the failed theologies of ancient Gnostics.

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## The World's Christians: Who They Are, Where They Are, and How They Got There

By Douglas Jacobsen

Wiley-Blackwell, 416 pp., \$39.95 paperback

Shortly after the end of World War II, the Maryknoll order's John J. Considine, an ecumenically minded missiologist who had visited virtually every major center of Christian missionary activity in the world, was one of the first to use the phrase "world Christianity," when he said, "Christianity is not true Christianity unless it embraces all mankind—unless it is *world Christianity*." In his little book called *World Christianity*, Considine used the phrase to describe both the theological essence of Christianity and what was coming into being as a social reality in the late 1940s.

Nearly 70 years later, Douglas Jacobsen has written a comprehensive survey of what that movement has become. A professor of church history at

Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania, Jacobsen is the author of a well-received study of the theologies of early Pentecostalism (*Thinking in the Spirit*) and, with his wife Rhonda Jacobsen, editor of the highly regarded *The American University in a Postsecular Age*. He is one of the most reliable and insightful scholars of world Christianity writing today.

*The World's Christians* is divided into three parts that correspond to the subtitle of his book: one part each to tell who the world's Christians are, where they are and how they got there. Jacobsen gives an overview of the history and basic characteristics of the four principal Christian traditions: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal/Charismatic.

The overviews are accurate and up-to-date, though it seems odd to begin Catholicism in the 11th century. It is true, of course, that the reforms of canon lawyers led to the development of a more uniform, papally centered Western church at about that time. Still, it's not a minor quibble to note this oddity in a book that so successfully draws on the self-

understanding of the other three traditions to tell the reader who the world's Christians are. For even Catholics who do not think that the apostle Peter's ministry evolved into a full-blown imperial papacy trace the evolution of the papacy to a process already under way in the second and third centuries and attested to by Mediterranean documents of that time, when bishops of Rome were spoken of as Peter's successors to whom at least a primacy of honor was due. That reservation aside, Jacobsen masterfully sketches the nine geographical areas where the world's Christians are.

The term *world Christianity* has been widely used since the publication of Philip Jenkins's 2002 best seller *The Next Christendom*, but in popular usage it has tended—mistakenly, in my view—to refer only to Christianity in the Global South. Though courses on world Christianity have proliferated in colleges, universities and seminaries, no one until Jacobsen has taken the care to delineate the historical, demographic and theological contours of the entire global movement.

Writing on world Christianity tends to idealize people living in the Global South, and it tends to lump churches together and avoid portraying their particularities and their social realities. Progressive writers, for example, may avoid bringing into relief such matters as the visceral rejection of homosexuality by many African, Asian and Latin American Christians. Evangelical writers tend to trumpet that abhorrence, saying that it is consonant with ancient Israel's views and with authentic Christianity. In other words, writers tend to praise or to be silent about various realities as doing so suits their domestic agenda.

This is not a new problem for interpreters of Christianity "beyond the West." The first rapporteurs wrote not only to inform people in their home countries about their work but also to attract recruits to the mission field and money to carry on the work. There were exceptions, to be sure. In his *Spiritual Revolution in the East* (1940), the Prot-

*Reviewed by William R. Burrows, research professor of missiology at New York Theological Seminary.*

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estant German missiologist Walter Freytag went to great lengths to explain the social and political situation in churches he visited in the late 1930s in New Guinea, Indonesia, India and China. But we realize now how premature was Freytag's conviction that in New Guinea, for instance, "sorcery has been abjured and the objects of magic destroyed." The fact that traditional rituals, including sorcery, are still practiced by many Christians is not mentioned even today in polite circles.

Freytag was unusually farseeing, but even he felt the need to make indigenous Christianity inspiring and familiar to his European readers, and he did not report the full width of the cultural gap between it and the Christianity of the "sending country." And he knew that his European audience was incapable of giving up its presupposition that it represented civilization and that African and Oceanic traditions were primitive.

Why raise this issue in relation to Jacobsen's book? Because the task he has undertaken and so well accomplished should be judged by how well he introduces the many textures of a world faith that is certainly rooted in Jesus of Nazareth, but also in the histories and cultures of its adherents—cultures that today are often in distress.

Jacobsen situates the four basic Christian traditions in nine carefully delineated geographical areas: the Middle East and North Africa, Eastern Europe, Central and South Asia, Western Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, Latin America, North America and Oceania. With depth and acuity, Jacobsen offers judicious assessments of the religious and cultural characteristics of each area and the shapes of Christianity in each.

Ultimately, however, I was left with a few questions. Can world Christianity become a true, multicultural communion of brothers and sisters? Can Christians in one hemisphere break out of their habit of viewing believers in another as true Christians only to the extent that, for example, they share their ideas on sexual ethics and gender identity? Can they feel one with others who differ? Can Presbyterians in, say, Malawi participate with American Presbyterians as cherished equals in the Reformed

movement? Is this even a goal, or are Protestants trapped in national denominations? On the other hand, can Catholics do better than attempt to enforce global uniformity in liturgy and ordination policies?

On biblical grounds, the universality of Christian life lies in the one Spirit knitting peoples into the one body of Christ. Jacobsen provides readers with the best available picture of diversity and the challenges to consciously becoming one body. Diversity is not going away, and events of the past several years make one wonder whether Christians are prepared to live with the restraint that communion demands when believers in one culture are not prepared to give up their traditions simply because another culture is changing.

The theological question is whether, in the midst of the plurality that Jacobsen reveals, a new kind of ecumenism will develop that is big enough to recognize a deeper unity in Christ—and then to produce the love that will make a difference.

## The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined

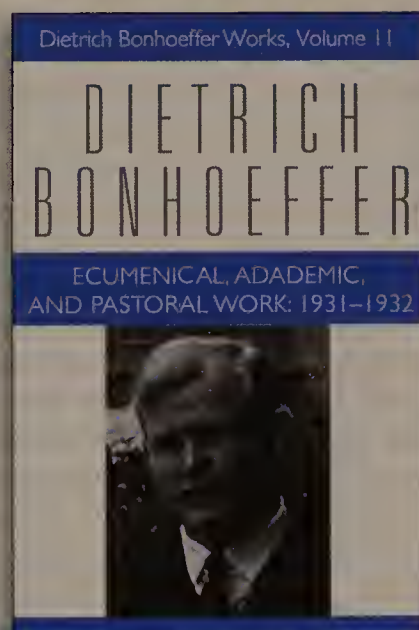
By Steven Pinker

Viking, 832 pp., \$40.00

Taking a long look back through human history, Steven Pinker draws an overarching conclusion: human beings are becoming less violent. To make his case, he draws from work in many areas of history, philosophy, sociology and psychology. He casts a very wide net, trying to think on both the scale of millennia and the scale of the individual human. By the time I finished *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, I wasn't so much convinced as overwhelmed. I felt like I had been at a dinner party where one guest had done all the talking about everything he knows.

Reviewed by Amy Frykholm, CENTURY assistant editor and author of the recently released *See Me Naked: Stories of Sexual Exile in American Christianity* (Beacon).

## Bonhoeffer's political views and theological development



978-0-8006-9838-6 556 pp  
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DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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Pinker's book can be divided roughly into three parts. In the historical section, he identifies three large-scale developments in human history that led, he argues, to a lessening of violence: the move of humans into cities and onto farms, the development of the nation-state in Europe and the philosophical Enlightenment, also in Europe. In the second section, Pinker tries to work both historically and with contemporary social science to show that in the past 50 years violence has decreased remarkably worldwide, and especially in Europe and the United States. He calls this "The Long Peace" and "The New Peace." In the book's third and by far the most interesting and nuanced section, Pinker looks into the psychology of human violence and the psychology of nonviolence, speculating on human nature and the human future.

Running through the book is one theme that unlocks everything else: we are becoming less violent because of the development of reason. The breakthrough for Western Europe was in the philosophical Enlightenment:

People started to place a higher value on human life. Part of this newfound appreciation was an emotional change: a habit of identifying with the pains and pleasures of others. And another part of this was an intellectual and moral change: a shift from valuing souls to valuing lives. . . . This gradual replacement of lives for souls as the locus of moral value was helped along by the ascendancy of skepticism and reason.

Pinker makes this move rhetorically many times in different sections of the book, and it is a frustrating one because the repetition never deepens understanding. Colonial and postcolonial thought, feminist critique of the Enlightenment and moral philosophy's question "Whose Justice, Whose Rationality?" are ignored. By the end, I could only think that the aim was to convince readers that all people could, would and should think like Steven Pinker, and that if they did the world would be a better place.

Pinker's philosophical agenda hampers his reading of history. He moves at such a quick pace through so much history that he appears to be working anecdotally.

Even his graphs and charts seem to represent rhetorical feints and dodges rather than hard evidence.

Take, for example, his romp through the Bible. He begins, "The Bible is one long celebration of violence." It is true that the Bible contains horrific depictions of violence. I don't object to Pinker's drawing our attention to it. But he leaps through the Bible, touching on its goriest details, with no self-awareness and very little biblical scholarship referenced in the notes. I would not expect Pinker, a psychologist by training, to become an expert in the Bible for the purpose of writing this book. But I did expect a gesture toward a field of knowledge and opinion that includes 5,000 years of midrash and exegesis. What he offers instead is an anecdotal race through texts that loses in complexity what it gains in momentum.

He concludes that he really has no idea why people would cling to this account of humanity, which is "staggering in its savagery." He writes that contemporary religious people's reverence for the Bible is "purely talismanic," that they "pay it lip service as a symbol of morality, while getting their actual morality from more modern principles." Pinker does not unpack what he means by "actual morality" until 500 pages later, and he does not back up with any data his account of how people read the Bible. By then he has moved on to anecdotes from the Roman Empire. Later he claims that Martin Luther King Jr. "rejected mainstream Christian theology and drew his inspiration from Gandhi, secular Western philosophy and renegade humanistic theologians." His treatment of nearly every event he considers is similarly biased toward his worldview without much thoughtfulness.

Rhetorically, Pinker has worked himself into a difficult spot: every event in all of history has to be read within the totalizing force of his narrative. If it doesn't fit his thesis, it must be explained away. If it does fit, it must be turned from an example to the basis of a generality. Explaining away the Holocaust, recent genocides and a 50-year saga of American-led violent conflicts is a neat trick, but I didn't find it convincing. In the end, he has not proven that violence has declined for everyone everywhere. Instead he has suggested the possibility that current circumstances in this or that country may



or may not be a blip on the historical radar that may or may not indicate an overall reduction in violence if more of us become scientists and read Hobbes.

The book improves considerably when Pinker turns from history to psychology. In this section he offers a nuanced portrait of violence, undoing the monolithic concept that has driven the book so far. He writes that “human nature accommodates motives that impel us to violence, like predation, dominance and vengeance, but also motives that—under the right circumstances—impel us toward peace, like compassion, fairness, self-control, and reason.” He uses a number of studies in behavioral and neural psychology to explore how the brain responds to stimuli and to discuss what creates impulses to violence as diverse as hunting, revenge and genocide. A lot of this is familiar territory. For example, we already know that humans cannot be divided neatly into two categories, the good and the bad; that people respond with surprising submission to authority, even when they disagree morally with what authorities are saying; and that men are more likely than women to respond violently to certain stimuli.

Fascinatingly, the psychology of nonviolence appears to be more complicated than the psychology of violence. In contrast to the relatively straightforward adrenalin and testosterone hit of revenge, Pinker points us to chemical and neurological interrelations in the case of something like empathy: “The overall picture that has emerged from the study of the compassionate brain is that there is no empathy center with empathy neurons, but complex patterns of activation and modulation that depend on perceivers’ interpretation of the straits of another person and the nature of their relationship with that other person.”

If this is the case, then it suggests that there are both positive and negative trends on the question of violence. For example, human interrelation is becoming increasingly self-evident—Pinker calls this the “expanding circle.” That does seem like psychological development in a compassionate direction. On the other hand, modern technological tendencies toward individuation can be troubling. One might argue that the cost of our expanding connections may be the loss of depth.

Toward the end of the book, Pinker wrestles with the question of whether he is discussing an evolutionary shift toward a reduction in violence or a change in social mores. The book is heading toward an assertion that reason is the paramount virtue that can explain why violence has declined, so he wants to determine why we are becoming more reasonable. Is it occurring biologically and evolutionarily or as a result of shifting understandings given to us by science and humanistic philosophy? He does not neatly resolve this tension but leans toward the latter explanation, saying the former can’t be asserted at this historical juncture.

Pinker is intrigued, for example, by the rapid growth in IQ scores across the board since 1910, something known as the Flynn Effect. “The Flynn Effect has been found in thirty countries, including some in the developing world,” he writes. After a great deal of wrangling with these numbers and what they might mean, he concludes that at the very least the rise of IQ scores is evidence that “scientific reasoning infiltrated from the schoolhouse and other institutions into everyday thinking.” We are getting smarter, he says. And smarter people are less violent.

These last two statements are frustrating. What does Pinker mean by *smarter*? Can smartness be equated with reason? Is smartness really a function of an IQ score? And is there really a correlation between higher IQ scores and lower levels of violence? Pinker says that there is and offers moderately convincing evidence, but given that Pinker has not adequately addressed the dark side of reason, I remain skeptical.

I do not necessarily disagree with Pinker. For example, I think that education can have a powerful effect on human societies and is likely to reduce violence. But I also have the odd perception that Pinker’s book is itself an act of violence—a totalizing, numbing, monolithic attempt to think everything at once, to pile on evidence in order to crowd out any voice that says, “But wait a minute!” and to hoard all remaining space for himself. If you don’t agree with Pinker, or you are not sure you agree, it is probably because you are unenlightened and brutish or just not very smart, like all those people in the Middle Ages.

## Saint Sinatra and Other Poems

By Angela Alaimo O’Donnell

WordTech, 100 pp., \$19.00 paperback

Angela O’Donnell’s deliciously sassy poems are born of her deeply Catholic imagination. A professor of English and the associate director of the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies, O’Donnell builds a house of saints, canonized or not, including some who have never been associated with sainthood in the traditional sense of the word.

To begin with, what qualifies Frank Sinatra as a saint? “St. Sinatra” is a tribute to the irresistible charm of the blue-eyed crooner, who turns girls into devotees by singing “a true tune we know and can’t carry.” He is the “Hoboken Hero of Eros,” and readers may find themselves part of those who plead with him in the final couplet, “Pray for us, Sinner.” The volume’s cover art shows, against a golden backdrop of traditional saints, Sinatra’s mug shot from the time he was arrested on a morals charge in 1938. Despite his shady past, the brilliance of Sinatra’s performance makes him a holy vessel, worthy to intercede on behalf of the believers in his art; it endows him with the power to “Sing us alive.”

In its playful content and swing-jazzy form, “St. Sinatra” is an alluring entrance. O’Donnell sorts her saints into six sec-

*Reviewed by Miho Nonaka, who teaches creative writing and literature at Wheaton College.*

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tions ("Sisters," "Brothers," "Speaking in Tongues," "Seeing Through Not with the Eye," "Holy Ground" and "Household Saints," with a poem of "heresy" ending each section). O'Donnell's selection ranges from canonical saints like St. Catherine of Siena (or, more casually, St. Kate); biblical characters like the practically minded St. Martha, begrudging her sister's time at Jesus' feet; legendary artists like St. Vincent (Van Gogh), painting the world in whorls of colors; to literary giants like St. Melville and even his villainous hero, St. Ahab. Part of what makes this collection so daring is the poet's clear refusal to draw conventional boundaries between good and evil, body and spirit, secular and religious arts, the beatified elect and the unblessed mediocrities. The book even includes Mozart's nemesis, "St. Salieri."

*Saint Sinatra and Other Poems* is also a celebration of the sensual pleasure of poetry. The entire volume is marked by the distinct joy O'Donnell takes in the sound and rhythm of language. In the concluding poem, in which she calls the reader to "crack k's with your crowns / roll l's across your taste-budded tongue," we hear the voice of a female poet whose creations beckon to readers with a hearty "*mangia!*" And so we do. We lip-synch along with Edna St. Vincent Millay ("What lips my lips have kissed and where and why / are lips my lips have missed, and so I try") and enjoy the fine rhymes and taut rhythmic structure found in a number of O'Donnell's poems like well-defined muscles.

The deftly crafted sonnet that opens the "Household Saints" section is an ekphrastic poem inspired by a charcoal drawing by Margie Crisp, "Inferno on Dumbwater Creek," which also happens to be on the cover of O'Donnell's debut poetry collection *Moving House*. The dramatic description of a burning house is followed by the responses (or lack thereof) from things that are present on the scene: the moon, the windows, the clouds. The image of a collapsing house provides a viable counterpoint to the poetic structure of O'Donnell's book, which enshrines both orthodox and unorthodox saints. The house could symbolize one's past and present homes, the

architectural arrangement of a poetry manuscript, a house of God, even the Catholic Church. The poet's fiery imagination seems to cleanse and bring new life to stagnant, calcified notions of faith and art.

The debated link between faith and art occupies much of "The Conversation," a long six-part poem placed in the book's middle. It is based on the final meeting between Thomas Merton, the iconoclastic Trappist monk and author, and Czeslaw Milosz, the acclaimed Polish poet and political exile. This open-form, quote-driven poem doesn't showcase O'Donnell's sonic mastery, and despite the title, the collage of quotes does not synthesize into a conversation but portrays the two great minds talking past each other. Still, a scene of such "minds" joining for a night of a fleshly feast is artfully rendered.

What underlies this scrumptious dinner is the tension between the maker and the made, the singleness of the universal faith and the delightful multiplicity of the world. If the art of verse-making calls the poet to become, indiscriminately, legions of people and things of this world, are we to call it a work of demons or angels?

As we exit O'Donnell's eclectic house of saints and unique hagiography, she leaves us with what's more a puzzle than an answer. The final poem, "Poet's Heresy," pronounces poetry "lies & truth, death & life," "every thing & no thing at all." The end of the poem adopts eucharistic language: "It is my body & blood. / Here. Take. Eat." Is poetry equal to sacrament? The gravity of such a notion is best understood by those who have tried their hand at writing poetry. No matter whether the verse is about saints or devils, writing it is an act of giving oneself away, though not without artifice, disguise and awareness of one's limitations. What comes out of the poet is and isn't real.

O'Donnell's collection of poems provides a Walt Whitman of menus, mirroring her serious engagement with the corporeal essence of Catholic imagination and its symphonic appetite. Its variety is pleasurable and challenging. It is also an act of faith.

## BookMarks

### **Wounded I Am More Awake: Finding Meaning after Terror**

By Julia Lieblich and Esad Boskailo

Vanderbilt University Press,

192 pp., \$19.95 paperback

After enduring a Croatian concentration camp in 1993, where he was brutalized by his own neighbors, Boskailo came to Chicago with his family and tried to restart his life. Trained as a physician in Bosnia, Boskailo became a psychiatrist in the U.S. because he wanted to help other survivors of atrocities and trauma. Journalist Lieblich devotes the first half of the book to Boskailo's experience as a Bosnian Muslim, the second to his halting efforts to be a wounded healer. Boskailo found that neither psychiatric training nor his own suffering made him useful to others. What victims need is simply someone who listens to their story and believes it and who is patient enough to give them space and time to attach themselves to life again.

### **Flourishing Life: Now and in the Time to Come**

By Sandra M. Levy-Achtemeier

Cascade Books, 140 pp., \$17.00 paperback

In readable fashion Levy-Achtemeier explores what it means for humans to flourish. Trained as a psychologist and an Episcopal priest, she draws on evolutionary neuroscience, positive psychology and theology. Relying especially on Teilhard de Chardin, she argues that we are to be cocreators with God of our own lives. She draws on interviews she conducted with recent retirees to see how they assessed their lives and how they perceive their future. A life well lived is one in which we make the most of our inborn traits, what is given to us by the people and culture around us and the practices in which we engage. Even tragedy and calamity, depending on how we respond to them, can lead toward our transformation as human beings. As a Christian, Levy-Achtemeier believes in the resurrection; so, she says, our final flourishing happens in the life to come.



## Marvel's The Avengers

Written and directed by Joss Whedon

Starring Robert Downey Jr., Scarlett Johansson, Chris Evans and Mark Ruffalo

Writer-director Joss Whedon, the creator of the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, saves the world from destruction yet again in the first of the summer blockbusters, *Marvel's The Avengers*. The adventure is moderately enjoyable but rather exhausting.

If you haven't seen previous Marvel comic book movies—*Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*, *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger*—or if you've seen them but haven't retained the plot threads, it may take you half an hour or so to get your bearings.

Beamed down on earth from the distant planet Asgard, Thor's megalomaniac brother Loki (Tom Hiddleston) steals a blue cube that can empower him to destroy the earth and rule the universe. So Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), the leader of the secret spy and law enforcement agency known as S.H.I.E.L.D., brings together a quartet of superheroes to fight Loki: Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.), Captain America (Chris Evans), the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo) and Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson). Thor (Chris Hemsworth) joins the force as well. Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner), the fifth member of the crew, is placed under a spell by Loki and turned against his comrades.

The movie's distinctive quality is its ironic humor. The joke at the heart of Ruffalo's performance is that he's a brilliant doctor who has to keep himself in check because anger turns him into a



**ODD COUPLE:** *Iron Man* (Robert Downey Jr., left) and *Captain America* (Chris Evans, right) comically try to put aside personal differences.

Neanderthal with a penchant for smashing things up—yet the physical prowess available to him as the Hulk is the superpower he has to learn to harness. The film pits Iron Man, hipster playboy genius Tony Stark, against Captain America, straight-arrow World War II hero Steve Rogers—a mutually disdainful pair who have to learn to work together. Stark gets the movie's funniest lines; you can feel Whedon's delight in writing for Downey, who can do more with a joke than anyone since Groucho Marx. And Evans, who has a gift for making squareness comic, provides Downey with the ideal foil.

Renner unfortunately misses out on the fun. The role of a bewitched do-gooder gives him nothing to play, and when he snaps out of the spell, Whedon doesn't supply him with a character to slip into. And Loki is a standard-issue villain; he even talks in that dreadful faux-classical dialect Hollywood has fallen back on since Cecil B. DeMille.

A larger problem is the overscaled fight scenes. The movie goes on for nearly two and a half hours—a good 40 minutes too long—and more than half of this is taken up with epic combat sequences. They aren't done badly, but all that hardware and computer-generated imagery become mind-numbing after a while. In the climactic scene, the Avengers have to field multiple threats to the world's very existence. Then Whedon interrupts the end credits to prep us for a sequel. But what on earth can he whip up for an encore?

## Dark Shadows

Directed by Tim Burton

Starring Johnny Depp, Eva Green and Michelle Pfeiffer

*Dark Shadows*, Tim Burton's film of the popular camp-gothic soap opera from the '60s and early '70s, is silly and over the top. But it has a marvelous, billowing look (courtesy of cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel), and it's quite entertaining. Barnabas Collins (Johnny Depp), imprisoned in a coffin by a witch (Eva Green) after she'd first turned him into a vampire, is unearthed in a Maine fishing village after 200 years and sets out to restore his dilapidated family (Michelle Pfeiffer is the current matriarch) to grandeur.

Seth Grahame-Smith's script doesn't have much craft: characters drift in and out of focus, as if the movie kept remembering suddenly that they exist. But the actors look like they're having a grand time, even if most of them don't have much to do.

As for Depp, he's a marvel. His performance is premised on two running gags: the tension between Barnabas's gentlemanly politesse and his thirst for blood, and his quizzical response to the accoutrements of the modern world. (The film is set in 1972.) The first thing Barnabas sees as he emerges from the grave is a huge, illuminated McDonald's sign, which he takes to be the gaze of the devil: "M" for Mephistopheles. He's peerlessly funny.

*Reviewed by Steve Vineberg, who teaches at the College of the Holy Cross.*



## Animals in the kingdom

Will there be pets in heaven? It's a not uncommon question among Americans, who love their pets and over a lifetime possess a succession of them. Will there be animals in heaven? More to the point, will my beloved Merle or Lucinda or Marley or Sassy be in heaven?

The complexion of the question changes considerably in light of recent accounts of the afterlife, which emphasize that God will create not only a new heavens but a new earth. Ultimately, "in accordance with his promise, we wait for a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Pet. 3:13). Last month I discussed a spate of recent books that affirm the transformed new earth. These

them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

In somewhat less poetical language, Paul assumes that the whole creation (presumably including animals) is waiting "with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the

natural praise of God. As kingfishers "catch fire" and dragonflies "draw flame," each "mortal thing does one thing and the same." It lives out its created essence so that it "speaks and spells" its God-given self, implicitly declaring, "*What I do is me: for that I came.*"

All this confirms a new creation replete with animal life, a zoological phantasmagoria of dazzling and glorious dimensions. But it does not necessarily affirm that particular animals are resurrected. It leaves open the question of whether or not a specific pet or pets will indwell the peaceable kingdom.

After all, any dog lover (to concentrate on a single but

means that dogs (and animals in general) are not as individuated as are persons.

Accordingly, perhaps the new earth will be indwelt by the quintessence of dogs and cats and so forth. Perhaps we will know and commune with dogs and cats in the new creation, but they will be perfect representations of the species—not resurrections of the particular dogs and cats we know in this present time and realm.

On the other hand, surely there can be no such thing as an overabundance of life in the new creation, which is to say there would be "room" for resurrected pets, no matter how many one owned in a lifetime. This seems more intuitively satisfying. It is, after all, particular dogs that we have loved and treasured as companions. We love given, specific dogs and not simple "dogness." I would like to meet again my deceased smooth-coat collie, Merle, and him more than some generic dog, however brimful of perfection.

But the future world, like the present, is not a creature of my preferences. So who can say? I at least cannot definitively answer the question of whether or not my (or your) pets will join us in the afterlife. But I am confident that the new creation will include animals of a wide variety, and will in any event be too wondrous for words.

## Perhaps the quintessence of dogs will be part of life in the new creation.

books, representing what we might call the new account of the afterlife, take seriously a rich set of biblical texts which affirm that the material creation will not pass away but will finally be taken up into God's eschatological work and be transformed as the dwelling place of resurrected human beings.

And not only human beings. Consider Isaiah 11:6–9, which looks ahead to the eschaton, where "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead

freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19–21).

As Edward Hicks's famous Quaker paintings suggest, the future peaceable kingdom will include a vast array of animals as well as plants. As the Bible and Christian tradition repeatedly attest, creation itself praises God, and apparently this praise will join that of angels and human beings and continue into eternity.

I have long thought that Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Inversnaid" most astutely captures this Christian theme of creation's ongoing,

representative species) knows that all dogs are very much alike, at least more thoroughly alike than are individual human beings. They are all concentrated on the sense of smell. They all play a limited repertoire of similar games. They eat the same foods, across all breeds. In short, dogs are not creatures possessing culture. Or perhaps they do possess a very rudimentary culture, but it is a single culture; they do not create—as do people—an array of differing cultures. All this

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*Rodney Clapp's Soundings column appears in every other issue.*



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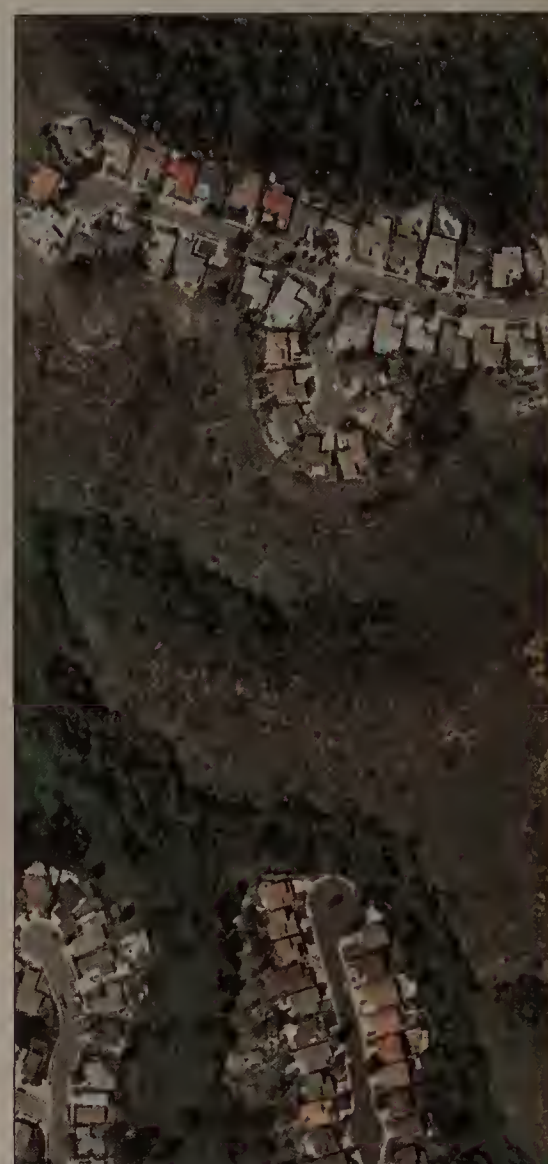
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*Ruach*, by Julie Elliot

Hillsides are shaped by the etched lines showing the wind blowing around them and through the trees. Below the surface, red-brown roots anchor the trees into the solid ground. In the season of Pentecost, the longest of the Christian year, we recount God's spirit coming to people dramatically in wind and fire. This is the helper Jesus promised, the presence we are called still to embody as we become Jesus' hands and feet in the world. The Hebrew word *Ruach*, which means wind, breath and spirit, is a form of onomatopoeia. Artist Julie Elliot says this mixed-media work on paper "celebrates God as the one who is close as our breath—intimate, essential and everywhere. I imagine this holy wind moving throughout the world."

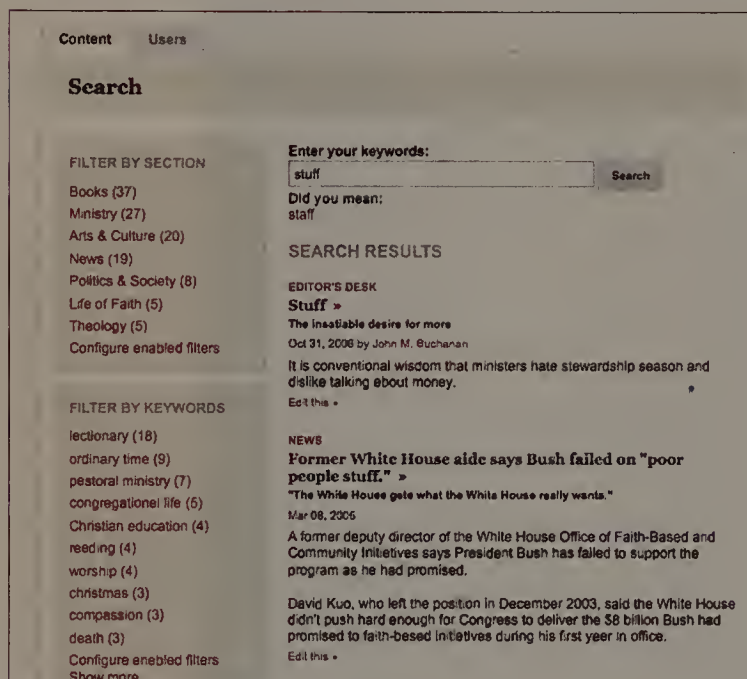
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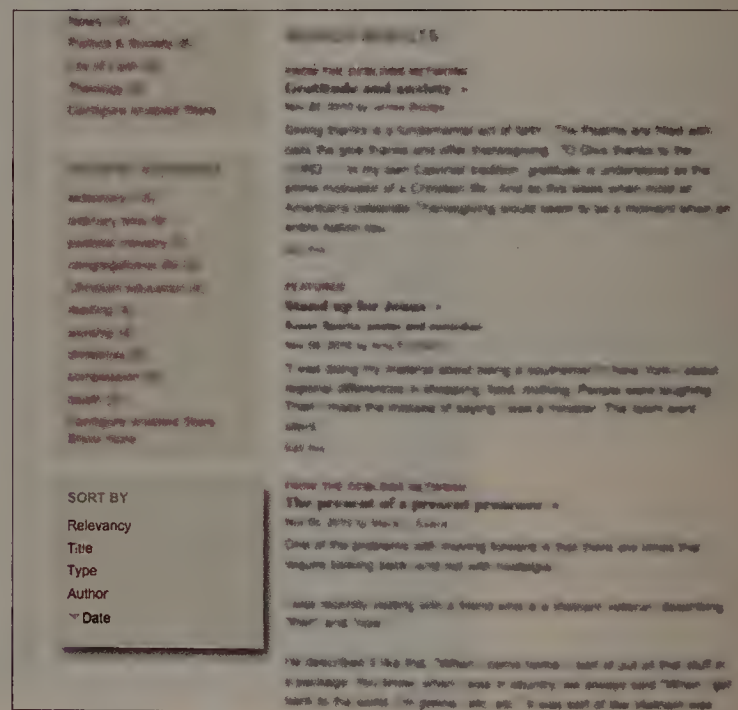
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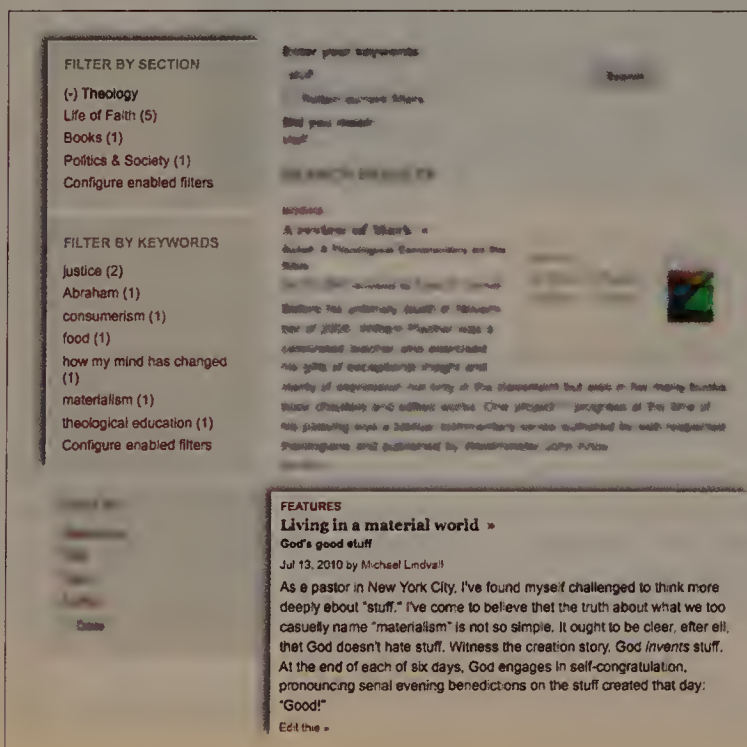
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